

PLANET

stories

SUMMER

10c



S. B. L.
APHRODISITE
by STANLEY
and
HAROLD
COPPEL
ST. CLAIR

Across the vast desert wastes of the Martian catacombs, the heroes of "Queen of the Martian Catacombs" battle the forces of evil and the forces of nature.

QUEEN OF THE MARTIAN CATACOMBS

A Dunsen-Smith Novel by LEIGH BRACKETT

PLANET STORIES



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A TREMENDOUS NEW BRACKETT NOVEL

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THE VIZIGRAPH

Greetings, fan-friends! Once again we put *you* on display—in the form of your letters—the best we have received.

Read, write, vote—the three Vizigraph functions from the very beginning. Perhaps *your* letter will be voted best in the next issue!

This time Radell Nelson (BeM) wins first choice of the pix in the Winter Ish. Congratulations! Then Bob Bradley hits second and names two choices, in case Nelson grabs his first. Bill Oberfeld comes in third—and chooses three.

Nice work, boys. Now let's see who wins this time!

—PLANET'S LITTLE PARASITE

MORE SEX IN THE FUTURE?

New Brunswick, N. J.

DEAR EDITOR:

These letters squawking emotionally against the inclusion of sex in science-fiction stories leave me disappointed, disturbed and more than a little disgusted. They seem to be the work of inhibited, repressed personalities. I am *not* placing myself in the position of endorsing smut or pornography, but I believe the subject of sex deserves some straightforward, adult handling.

If science-fiction has anything to offer other than mere escapism, its value lies in promoting a receptive, questioning attitude and freeing the mind from the narrow, superstition-bound, taboo-ridden ruts of accustomed thought channels.

Nearly every science-fiction story is a glimpse into some writer's conception of a possible future, and as change is the one certainty in this universe, the future will be different from the present. How different? Our present-day patterns are neither perfect nor static. Some of our better brains have concluded that if we don't rapidly learn as much about our own psychology and social structures as we already know about the guts of a uranium atom, we are heading for disaster on a grand scale.

Anyone not entirely prejudice-blinded can see that the conventional standards of sex conduct of today are irrational, hypocritical, and simply *are not working*. The Kinsey report indicates clearly that a socially dangerous schizoid gap exists between "moral principles" and actual conduct.

Our self-appointed "moral leaders" have decreed certain rules, to which everyone is supposed to adhere unquestioningly on blind faith alone. And they insist in the face of contrary evidence that these rules are eternal and immutable and unchanging. They carefully ignore the fact that other civilizations have done as well or better than our own in promoting human welfare, using an entirely different set of standards of conduct.

Polygamy has been successful in many places, until our own civilization intervened with superior military and police forces. (And the present Hollywood concept of marriage is nothing but legalized serial polygamy.) Many cultures, those of Crete and Athens and Bali, for instance, have

(Continued on page 105)

"I WAS ASHAMED OF MY FACE"

until **Viderm** helped make my skin clearer in one short week"

(FROM A LETTER BY E. S. JORDAN, DETROIT, MICH.)

If your face is broken-out, if bad skin is making you miserable, here is how to stop worrying about pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

JUST FOLLOW SKIN DOCTOR'S SIMPLE DIRECTIONS



IT DOESN'T PAY to put up with a broken-out face. Your very success in business, love and social life may depend upon your looks. *Handsome and a good appearance usually start with the condition of your skin.* Nobody likes to look at a face that is blemished by blackheads or pimples. **WOMEN ARE ATTRACTED TO MEN WHO HAVE SMOOTH, CLEAR, HEALTHY-LOOKING SKIN.** Business executives don't choose men whose complexions are against them. Don't take chances with your success in life when this inexpensive **Viderm** formula may help you.

Good-looking Skin Is Not for Women Only

You—yes, you—can have the same handsome complexion, free from externally caused skin troubles, simply by giving your face the special care that screen stars give theirs. There's almost nothing to it—it is just about as easy as washing your face. *The whole secret consists of washing your face in a way that thoroughly purges the pores of every last speck of dirt and grime—something that ordinary cleansing seldom does.* In fact, examination after examination shows that, usually, it is not a case of "bad skin" so much as a case of faulty cleansing. What you should use is a highly concentrated soap like **Viderm Skin Cleanser**. This penetrates the pores and acts as an anti-peptic. Specks of irritating dirt and grime are quickly washed out. They dissolve and disappear, leaving your skin

entirely free of the dirt particles that usually bring out pimples, blackheads and other externally-caused skin troubles.

Squeezing pimples or blackheads to get rid of them is a nasty, messy business—but that isn't the worst of it. Doing so may also be injurious and leave your face with unsightly, embarrassing blemishes. There is, now, a much easier, safer, cleaner way to help you rid your face of ugly, offensive, externally-caused skin troubles. *You merely follow a doctor's simple directions.*

Don't murder your skin! Here's all you have to do to get it smoother and clearer and to keep it that way. Use **Viderm Skin Cleanser** when you wash your face. Rub the rich lather of this highly-concentrated medicated soap on your face for just a few seconds and then rinse it off. Then apply a little **Viderm Medicated Skin Cream** and that's all there is to it. **Viderm Medicated Skin Cream** quickly disappears, leaving your skin nice and smooth. This simple treatment, used after shaving, helps heal tiny nicks and cuts, relieves razor-burn and smarting, besides conditioning your skin.



DON'T DO THIS!

Don't murder your skin by squeezing it. Skin is delicate. When you break it, you leave yourself open to misery. It's far easier, far safer, to let the Double **Viderm** Treatment help you enjoy a handsome, clearer, blemish-free complexion.

Give Your Face This Treat for 7 Days

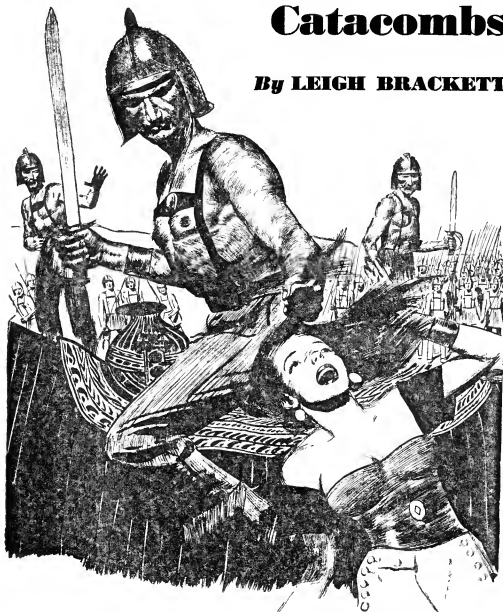
Stop worrying and being embarrassed over what may happen to your skin. Just send for your **Viderm Double Treatment** this minute, and be confident of a smoother and clearer complexion. Follow the simple directions, written by a doctor, that you will get with your **Viderm Double Treatment**. Then look in your mirror and listen to your friends admire your smoother, clearer skin—the kind that women go for.

Just mail your name and address to The New York Skin Laboratory, 206 Division Street, Dept. 40, New York City 2, N. Y. By return mail you will receive both of the **Viderm** formulas, complete with full directions, and mailed in a plain wrapper. On delivery, pay two dollars plus postage. If you wish, you can have the postage fee by mailing the two dollars with your letter. Then, if you aren't thrilled with results, your money will be cheerfully refunded. Remember that both of the formulas you use have been fully tested and proven, and are reliable for you. *If they don't help you, your treatments cost you nothing.* After you have received your **Viderm**, if you have any questions to ask concerning abused skin, just send them in.



Queen Of The Martian Catacombs

By LEIGH BRACKETT



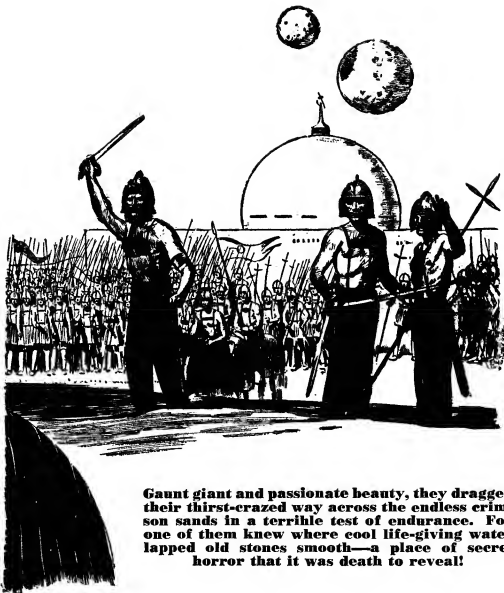
She would have broken past him, but Delgaun was too quick.

FOR HOURS THE HARD-pressed beast had fled across the Martian desert with its dark rider. Now it was spent. It faltered and broke stride, and when the rider cursed and dug his heels into the scaly sides, the brute only turned its head and hissed at him. It stumbled on a few more paces into the lee

of a sandhill, and there it stopped, crouching down in the dust.

The man dismounted. The creature's eyes burned like green lamps in the light of the little moons, and he knew that it was no use trying to urge it on. He looked back, the way he had come.

In the distance there were four black



Gaunt giant and passionate beauty, they dragged their thirst-crazed way across the endless crimson sands in a terrible test of endurance. For one of them knew where cool life-giving water lapped old stones smooth—a place of secret horror that it was death to reveal!

shadows grouped together in the barren emptiness. They were running fast. In a few minutes they would be upon him.

He stood still, thinking what he should do next. Ahead, far ahead, was a low ridge, and beyond the ridge lay Valkis and safety, but he could never make it now. Off to his right, a lonely tor stood up out of the blowing sand. There were tumbled rocks at its foot.

"They tried to run me down in the open," he thought. "But here, by the Nine Hells, they'll have to work for it!"

He moved then, running toward the tor with a lightness and speed incredible in anything but an animal or a savage. He was of Earth stock, built tall, and more massive than he looked by reason of his leanness. The desert wind was bitter cold, but he did not seem to notice it, though

he wore only a ragged shirt of Venusian spider silk, open to the waist. His skin was almost as dark as his black hair, burned indelibly by years of exposure to some terrible sun. His eyes were startlingly light in colour, reflecting back the pale glow of the moons.

With the practised ease of a lizard he slid in among the loose and treacherous rocks. Finding a vantage point, where his back was protected by the tor itself, he crouched down.

After that he did not move, except to draw his gun. There was something eerie about his utter stillness, a quality of patience as unhuman as the patience of the rock that sheltered him.

The four black shadows came closer, resolved themselves into mounted men.

They found the beast, where it lay panting, and stopped. The line of the man's footprints, already blurred by the wind but still plain enough, showed where he had gone.

The leader motioned. The others dismounted. Working with the swift precision of soldiers, they removed equipment from their saddle-packs and began to assemble it.

The man crouching under the tor saw the thing that took shape. It was a Banning shocker, and he knew that he was not going to fight his way out of this trap. His pursuers were out of range of his own weapon. They would remain so. The Banning, with its powerful electric beam, would take him—dead or senseless, as they wished.

He thrust the useless gun back into his belt. He knew who these men were, and what they wanted with him. They were officers of the Earth Police Control, bringing him a gift—twenty years in the Luna cell-blocks.

Twenty years in the grey catacombs, buried in the silence and the eternal dark.

He recognized the inevitable. He was used to inevitables—hunger, pain, loneliness, the emptiness of dreams. He had accepted a lot of them in his time. Yet he made no move to surrender. He looked out at the desert and the night sky, and his eyes blazed, the desperate, strangely beautiful eyes of a creature very close to

the roots of life, something less and more than man. His hands found a shard of rock and broke it.

The leader of the four men rode slowly toward the tor, his right arm raised.

His voice carried clearly on the wind. "Eric John Stark!" he called, and the dark man tensed in the shadows.

The rider stopped. He spoke again, but this time in a different tongue. It was no dialect of Earth, Mars or Venus, but a strange speech, as harsh and vital as the blazing Mercurian valleys that bred it.

"Oh N'Chaka, oh Man-without-a-tribe, I call you!"

There was a long silence. The rider and his mount were motionless under the low moons, waiting.

Eric John Stark stepped slowly out from the pool of blackness under the tor.

"Who calls me N'Chaka?"

The rider relaxed somewhat. He answered in English, "You know perfectly well who I am, Eric. May we meet in peace?"

Stark shrugged. "Of course."

HE walked on to meet the rider, who had dismounted, leaving his beast behind. He was a slight, wiry man, this EPC officer, with the rawhide look of the frontiers still on him. His hair was grizzled and his sun-blackened skin was deeply lined, but there was nothing in the least aged about his hard good-humored face nor his remarkably keen dark eyes.

"It's been a long time, Eric," he said.

Stark nodded. "Sixteen years." The two men studied each other for a moment, and then Stark said, "I thought you were still on Mercury, Ashton."

"They've called all us experienced hands in to Mars." He held out cigarettes. "Smoke?"

Stark took one. They bent over Ashton's lighter, and then stood there smoking while the wind blew red dust over their feet and the three men of the patrol waited quietly beside the Banning. Ashton was taking no chances. The electro-beam could stun without injury.

Presently Ashton said, "I'm going to be crude, Eric. I'm going to remind you of some things."

"Save it," Stark retorted. "You've got me. There's no need to talk about it."

"Yes," said Ashton, "I've got you, and a damned hard time I've had doing it. That's why I'm going to talk about it."

His dark eyes met Stark's cold stare and held it.

"Remember who I am—Simon Ashton. Remember who came along when the miners in that valley on Mercury had a wild boy in a cage, and were going to finish him off like they had the tribe that raised him. Remember all the years after that, when I brought that boy up to be a civilized human being."

Stark laughed, not without a certain humor. "You should have left me in the cage. I was caught a little old for civilizing."

"Maybe. I don't think so. Anyway, I'm reminding you," Ashton said.

Stark said, with no particular bitterness, "You don't have to get sentimental. I know it's your job to take me in."

Ashton said deliberately, "I won't take you in, Eric, unless you make me." He went on then, rapidly, before Stark could answer. "You've got a twenty-year sentence hanging over you, for running guns to the Middle-Swamp tribes when they revolted against Terro-Venusian Metals, and a couple of similar jobs.

"All right. So I know why you did it, and I won't say I don't agree with you. But you put yourself outside the law, and that's that. Now you're on your way to Valkis. You're headed into a mess that'll put you on Luna for life, the next time you're caught."

"And this time you don't agree with me."

"No. Why do you think I broke my neck to catch you before you got there?" Ashton bent closer, his face very intent. "Have you made any deal with Delgaun of Valkis? Did he send for you?"

"He sent for me, but there's no deal yet. I'm on the beach. Broke. I got a message from this Delgaun, whoever he is, that there was going to be a private war back in the Drylands, and he'd pay me to help fight it. After all, that's my business."

Ashton shook his head.

"This isn't a private war, Eric. It's something a lot bigger and nastier than that. The Martian Council of City-States and the Earth Commission are both in a cold sweat, and no one can find out exactly what's going on. You know what the Low-Canal towns are—Valkis, Jekkara, Bar-rakesh. No law-abiding Martian, let alone an Earthman, can last five minutes in them. And the back-blocks are absolutely *verboden*. So all we get is rumors.

"Fantastic rumors about a barbarian chief named Kynon, who seems to be promising heaven and earth to the tribes of Kesh and Shun—some wild stuff about the ancient cult of the Ramas that everybody thought was dead a thousand years ago. We know that Kynon is tied up somehow with Delgaun, who is a most efficient bandit, and we know that some of the top criminals of the whole System are filtering in to join up. Knighton and Walsh of Terra, Themis of Mercury, Ar-rod of Callisto Colony—and, I believe, your old comrade in arms, Luhar the Venusian."

Stark gave a slight start, and Ashton smiled briefly.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I heard about that." Then he sobered. "You can figure that set-up for yourself, Eric. The barbarians are going to go out and fight some kind of a holy war, to suit the entirely unholy purposes of men like Delgaun and the others.

"Half a world is going to be raped, blood is going to run deep in the Drylands—and it will all be barbarian blood spilled for a lying promise, and the carrion crows of Valkis will get fat on it. Unless, somehow, we can stop it."

HE paused, then said flatly, "I want you to go on to Valkis, Eric—but as my agent. I won't put it on the grounds that you'd be doing civilization a service. You don't owe anything to civilization, Lord knows. But you might save a lot of your own kind of people from getting slaughtered, to say nothing of the border-state Martians who'll be the first to get Kynon's axe.

"Also, you could wipe that twenty-year hitch on Luna off the slate, maybe even

work up a desire to make a man of yourself, instead of a sort of tiger wandering from one kill to the next." He added, "If you live."

Stark said slowly, "You're clever Ashton. You know I've got a feeling for all planetary primitives like those who raised me, and you appeal to that."

"Yes," said Ashton, "I'm clever. But I'm not a liar. What I've told you is true."

Stark carefully ground out the cigarette beneath his heel. Then he looked up. "Suppose I agree to become your agent in this, and go off to Valkis. What's to prevent me from forgetting all about you, then?"

Ashton said softly, "Your word, Eric. You get to know a man pretty well when you know him from boyhood on up. Your word is enough."

There was a silence, and then Stark held out his hand. "All right, Simon—but only for this one deal. After that, no promises."

"Fair enough." They shook hands.

"I can't give you any suggestions," Ashton said. "You're on your own, completely. You can get in touch with me through the Earth Commission office in Tarak. You know where that is?"

Stark nodded. "On the Dryland Border."

"Good luck to you, Eric."

He turned, and they walked back together to where the three men waited. Ashton nodded, and they began to dismantle the Banning. Neither they nor Ashton looked back, as they rode away.

Stark watched them go. He filled his lungs with the cold air, and stretched. Then he roused the beast out of the sand. It had rested, and was willing to carry him again as long as he did not press it. He set off again, across the desert.

The ridge grew as he approached it, looming into a low mountain chain much worn by the ages. A pass opened before him, twisting between the hills of barren rock.

He traversed it, coming out at the farther end above the basin of a dead sea. The lifeless land stretched away into darkness, a vast waste of desolation more lone-

ly even than the desert. And between the sea-bottom and the foothills, Stark saw the lights of Valkis.

II

THERE WERE MANY LIGHTS, far below. Tiny pinpricks of flame where torches burned in the streets beside the Low-Canal—the thread of black water that was all that remained of a forgotten ocean.

Stark had never been here before. Now he looked at the city that sprawled down the slope under the low moons, and shivered, the primitive twitching of the nerves that an animal feels in the presence of death.

For the streets where the torches flared were only a tiny part of Valkis. The life of the city had flowed downward from the cliff-tops, following the dropping level of the sea. Five cities, the oldest scarcely recognizable as a place of human habitation. Five harbors, the docks and quays still standing, half buried in the dust.

Five ages of Martian history, crowned on the topmost level with the ruined palace of the old pirate kings of Valkis. The towers still stood, broken but indomitable, and in the moonlight they had a sleeping look, as though they dreamed of blue water and the sound of waves, and of tall ships coming in heavy with treasure.

Stark picked his way slowly down the steep descent. There was something fascinating to him in the stone houses, roofless and silent in the night. The paving blocks still showed the rutting of wheels where carters had driven to the marketplace, and princes had gone by in gilded chariots. The quays were scarred where ships had lain against them, rising and falling with the tides.

Stark's senses had developed in a strange school, and the thin veneer of civilization he affected had not dulled them. Now it seemed to him that the wind had the echoes of voices in it, and the smell of spices and fresh-spilled blood.

He was not surprised when, in the last level above the living town, armed men came out of the shadows and stopped him.

They were lean, dark men, very wiry

and light of foot, and their faces were the faces of wolves—not primitive wolves at all, but beasts of prey that had been civilized for so many thousands of years that they could afford to forget it.

They were most courteous, and Stark would not have cared to disobey their request.

He gave his name. "Delgaun sent for me."

The leader of the Valkisians nodded his narrow head. "You're expected." His sharp eyes had taken in every feature of the Earthman, and Stark knew that his description had been memorized down to the last detail. Valkis guarded its doors with care.

"Ask in the city," said the sentry. "Anyone can direct you to the palace."

Stark nodded and went on, down through the long-dead streets in the moonlight and the silence.

With shocking suddenness, he was plunged into the streets of the living.

It was very late now, but Valkis was awake and stirring. Seething, rather. The narrow twisting ways were crowded. The laughter of women came down from the flat roofs. Torchlight flared, gold and scarlet, lighting the wineshops, making blacker the shadows of the alley-mouths.

Stark left his beast at a *serai* on the edge of the canal. The paddocks were already jammed. Stark recognized the long-legged brutes of the Dryland breed, and as he left a caravan passed him, coming in, with a jangling of bronze bangles and a great hissing and stamping in the dust.

The riders were tall barbarians—Keshi, Stark thought, from the way they braided their tawny hair. They wore plain leather, and their blue-eyed women rode like queens.

Valkis was full of them. For days, it seemed, they must have poured in across the dead sea bottom, from the distant oases and the barren deserts of the back-blocks. Brawny warriors of Kesh and Shun, making holiday beside the Low-Canal, where there was more water than any of them had seen in their lives.

They were in Valkis, these barbarians, but they were not part of it. Shouldering his way through the streets, Stark got the

peculiar flavor of the town, that he guessed could never be touched or changed by anything.

In a square, a girl danced to the music of harp and drum. The air was heavy with the smell of wine and burning pitch and incense. A lithe, swart Valkisian in his bright kilt and jewelled girdle leaped out and danced with the girl, his teeth flashing as he whirled and postured. In the end he bore her off, laughing, her black hair hanging down his back.

Women looked at Stark. Women graceful as cats, bare to the waist, their skirts slit at the sides above the thigh, wearing no ornaments but the tiny golden bells that are the particular property of the Low-Canal towns, so that the air is always filled with their delicate, wanton chiming.

Valkis had a laughing, wicked soul. Stark had been in many places in his life, but never one before that beat with such a pulse of evil, incredibly ancient, but strong and gay.

He found the palace at last—a great rambling structure of quarried stone, with doors and shutters of beaten bronze closed against the dust and the incessant wind. He gave his name to the guard and was taken inside, through halls hung with antique tapestries, the flagged floors worn hollow by countless generations of sandalled feet.

A GAIN, Stark's half-wild senses told him that life within these walls had not been placid. The very stones whispered of age-old violence, the shadows were heavy with the lingering ghosts of passion.

He was brought before Delgaun, the lord of Valkis, in the big central room that served as his headquarters.

Delgaun was lean and catlike, after the fashion of his race. His black hair showed a stippling of silver, and the hard beauty of his face was strongly marked, the lines drawn deep and all the softness of youth long gone away. He wore a magnificent harness, and his eyes, under fine dark brows, were like drops of hot gold.

He looked up as the Earthman came in, one swift penetrating glance. Then he said, "You're Stark."

There was something odd about those yellow eyes, bright and keen as a killer hawk's yet somehow secret, as though the true thoughts behind them would never show through. Instinctively, Stark disliked the man.

But he nodded and came up to the council table, turning his attention to the others in the room. A handful of Martians—Low-Canallers, chiefs and fighting men from their ornaments and their proud looks—and several outlanders, their conventional garments incongruous in this place.

Stark knew them all. Knighton and Walsh of Terra, Themis of Mercury, Arrod of Callisto Colony—and Luhar of Venus. Pirates, thieves, renegades, and each one an expert in his line.

Ashton was right. There was something big, something very big and very ugly, shaping between Valkis and the Drylands.

But that was only a quick, passing thought in Stark's mind. It was on Luhar that his attention centered. Bitter memory and hatred had come to savage life within him as soon as he saw the Venusian.

The man was handsome. A cashiered officer of the crack Venusian Guards, very slim, very elegant, his pale hair cropped short and curling, his dark tunic fitting him like a second skin.

He said, "The aborigine! I thought we had enough barbarians here without sending for more."

Stark said nothing. He began to walk toward Luhar.

Luhar said sharply, "There's no use in getting nasty, Stark. Past scores are past. We're on the same side now."

The Earthman spoke, then, with a peculiar gentleness.

"We were on the same side once before. Against Terro-Venus Metals. Remember?"

"I remember very well!" Luhar was speaking now not to Stark alone, but to everyone in the room. "I remember that your innocent barbarian friends had me tied to the block there in the swamps, and that you were watching the whole thing with honest pleasure. If the Company men hadn't come along, I'd be screaming there yet."

"You sold us out," Stark said. "You had it coming."

He continued to walk toward Luhar.

Delgaun spoke. He did not raise his voice, yet Stark felt the impact of his command.

"There will be no fighting here," Delgaun said. "You are both hired mercenaries, and while you take my pay you will forget your private quarrels. Do you understand?"

Luhar nodded and sat down, smiling out of the corner of his mouth at Stark, who stood looking with narrowed eyes at Delgaun.

He was still half blind with his anger against Luhar. His hands ached for the kill. But even so, he recognized the power in Delgaun.

A sound shockingly akin to the growl of a beast echoed in his throat. Then, gradually, he relaxed. The man Delgaun he would have challenged. But to do so would wreck the mission that he had promised to carry out here for Ashton.

He shrugged, and joined the others at the table.

Walsh of Terra rose abruptly and began to prowl back and forth.

"How much longer do we have to wait?" he demanded.

Delgaun poured wine into a bronze goblet. "Don't expect me to know," he snapped. He shoved the flagon along the table toward Stark.

Stark helped himself. The wine was warm and sweet on his tongue. He drank slowly, sitting relaxed and patient while the others smoked nervously or rose to pace up and down.

Stark wondered what, or who, they were waiting for. But he did not ask.

Time went by.

Stark raised his head, listening. "What's that?"

Their duller ears had heard nothing, but Delgaun rose and flung open the shutters of the window near him.

The Martian dawn, brilliant and clear, flooded the dead sea bottom with harsh light. Beyond the black line of the canal a caravan was coming toward Valkis through the blowing dust.

It was no ordinary caravan. Warriors

rode before and behind, their spearheads blazing in the sunrise. Jewelled trappings on the beasts, a litter with curtains of crimson silk, barbaric splendor. Clear and thin on the air came the wild music of pipes and the deep-throated throbbing of drums.

Stark guessed without being told who it was that rode out of the desert like a king.

Delgaun made a harsh sound in his throat. "It's Kynon, at last!" he said, and swung around from the window. His eyes sparkled with some private amusement. "Let us go and welcome the Giver of Life!"

Stark went with them, out into the crowded streets. A silence had fallen on the town. Valkisian and barbarian alike were caught now in a breathless excitement, pressing through the narrow ways, flowing toward the canal.

Stark found himself beside Delgaun in the great square of the slave market, standing on the auction block, above the heads of the throng. The stillness, the expectancy of the crowd were uncanny . . .

To the measured thunder of drums and the wild skirling of desert pipes, Kynon of Shun came into Valkis.

III

STRAIGHT INTO THE SQUARE of the slave market the caravan came, and the people pressed back against the walls to make way for them. Stamping of padded hoofs on the stones, ring and clash of harness, brave glitter of spears and the great two-handed broadswords of the Drylands, with drumbeats to shake the heart and the savage cry of the pipes to set the blood leaping. Stark could not restrain an appreciative thrill in himself.

The advance guard reached the slave block. Then, with deafening abruptness, the drummers crossed their sticks and the pipers ceased, and there was utter silence in the square.

It lasted for almost a minute, and then from every barbarian throat the name of Kynon roared out until the stones of the city echoed with it.

A man leaped from the back of his

mount to the block, standing at its outer edge where all could see, his hands flung up.

"I greet you, my brothers!"

And the cheering went on.

Stark studied Kynon, surprised that he was so young. He had expected a gray-bearded prophet, and instead, here was a brawny-shouldered man of war standing as tall as himself.

Kynon's eyes were a bright, compelling blue, and his face was the face of a young eagle. His voice had deep music in it—the kind of voice that can sway crowds to madness.

Stark looked from him to the rapt faces of the people—even the Valkisians had caught the mood—and thought that Kynon was the most dangerous man he had ever seen. This tawny-haired barbarian in his kilt of bronze-bossed leather was already half a god.

Kynon shouted to the captain of his warriors, "Bring the captive and the old man!" Then he turned again to the crowd, urging them to silence. When at last the square was still, his voice rang challengingly across it.

"There are still those who doubt me. Therefore I have come to Valkis, and this day—now!—I will show proof that I have not lied!"

A roar and a mutter from the crowd. Kynon's men were lifting to the block a tottering ancient so bowed with years that he could barely stand, and a youth of Teran stock. The boy was in chains. The old man's eyes burned, and he looked at the boy beside him with a terrible joy.

Stark settled down to watch. The litter with the curtains of crimson silk was now beside the block. A girl, a Valkisian, stood beside it, looking up. It seemed to Stark that her green eyes rested on Kynon with a smouldering anger.

He glanced away from the serving girl, and saw that the curtains were partly open. A woman lay on the cushions within. He could not see much of her, except that her hair was like dark flame and she was smiling, looking at the old man and the naked boy. Then her glance, very dark in the shadows of the litter, shifted away and Stark followed it and saw Delgaun.

Every muscle of Delgaun's body was drawn taut, and he seemed unable to look away from the woman in the litter.

Stark smiled, very slightly. The outlanders were cynically absorbed in what was going on. The crowd had settled again to that silent, breathless tension. The sun blazed down out of the empty sky. The dust blew, and the wind was sharp with the smell of living flesh.

The old man reached out and touched the boy's smooth shoulder, and his gums showed bluish as he laughed.

Kynon was speaking again.

"There are still those who doubt me, I say! Those who scoffed when I said that I possessed the ancient secret of the Ramas of long ago—the secret by which one man's mind may be transferred into another's body. But none of you after to-day will doubt that I hold that secret!

"I, myself, am not a Rama." He glanced down along his powerful frame, half-consciously flexing his muscles, and laughed. "Why should I be a Rama? I have no need, as yet, for the Sending-on of Minds!"

Answering laughter, half ribald, from the crowd.

"No," said Kynon, "I am not a Rama. I am a man like you. Like you, I have no wish to grow old, and in the end, to die."

He swung abruptly to the old man.

"You, Grandfather! Would you not wish to be young again—to ride out to battle, to take the woman of your choice?"

The old man wailed, "Yes! Yes!" and his gaze dwelt hungrily upon the boy.

"And you shall be!" The strength of a god rang in Kynon's voice. He turned again to the crowd and cried out,

"For years I suffered in the desert alone, searching for the lost secret of the Ramas. And I found it, my brothers! I hold their ancient power. I alone—in these two hands I hold it, and with it I shall begin a new era for our Dryland races!

"There will be fighting, yes. There will be bloodshed. But when that is over and the men of Kesh and Shun are free from their ancient bondage of thirst and the men of the Low-Canals have regained their own—then I shall give new life, unending life, to all who have followed me.

The aged and lamed and wounded can choose new bodies from among the captives. There will be no more age, no more sickness, no more death!"

A rippling, shivering sigh from the crowd. Eyeballs gleaming in the bitter light, mouths open on the hunger that is nearest to the human soul.

"Lest anyone still doubt my promise," said Kynon, "watch. Watch—and I will show you!"

They watched. Not stirring, hardly breathing, they watched.

THE drums struck up a slow and solemn beat. The captain of the warriors, with an escort of six men, marched to the litter and took from the woman's hands a bundle wrapped in silks. Bearing it as though it were precious beyond belief, he came to the block and lifted it up, and Kynon took it from him.

The silken wrappings fluttered loose, fell away. And in Kynon's hands gleamed two crystal crowns and a shining rod.

He held them high, the sunlight glancing in cold fire from the crystal.

"Behold!" he said. "The Crowns of the Ramas!"

The crowd drew breath then, one long rasping *Ah!*

The solemn drumbeat never faltered. It was as though the pulse of the whole world throbbed within it. Kynon turned. The old man began to tremble. Kynon placed one crown on his wrinkled scalp, and the tottering creature winced as though in pain, but his face was ecstatic.

Relentlessly, Kynon crowned with the second circlet the head of the frightened boy.

"Kneel," he said.

They knelt. Standing tall above them, Kynon held the rod in his two hands, between the crystal crowns.

Light was born in the rod. It was no reflection of the sun. Blue and brilliant, it flashed along the rod and leaped from it to wake an answering brilliance in the crowns, so that the old man and the youth were haloed with a chill, supernal fire.

The drumbeat ceased. The old man cried out. His hands plucked feebly at his head, then went to his breast and clenched

there. Quite suddenly he fell forward over his knees. A convulsive tremor shook him. Then he lay still.

The boy swayed and then fell forward also, with a clashing of chains.

The light died out of the crowns. Kynon stood a moment longer, rigid as a statue, holding the rod which still flickered with blue lightning. Then that also died.

Kynon lowered the rod. In a ringing voice he cried, "Arise, Grandfather!"

The boy stirred. Slowly, very slowly, he rose to his feet. Holding out his hands, he stared at them, and then touched his thighs, and his flat belly, and the deep curve of his chest.

Up the firm young throat the wondering fingers went, to the smooth cheeks, to the thick fair hair above the crown. A cry broke from him.

With the perfect accent of the Drylands, the Earth boy cried in Martian, "I am in the youth's body! I am young again!"

A scream, a wail of ecstasy, burst from the crowd. It swayed like a great beast, white faces turned upward. The boy fell down and embraced Kynon's knees.

Eric John Stark found that he himself was trembling slightly. He glanced at Delgaun and the outlanders. The Valkisian wore a look of intense satisfaction under his mask of awe. The others were almost as rapt and open-mouthed as the crowd.

Stark turned his head slightly and looked down at the litter. One white hand was already drawing the curtains, so that the scarlet silk appeared to shake with silent laughter.

The serving girl beside it had not moved. Still she looked up at Kynon, and there was nothing in her eyes but hate.

After that there was bedlam, the rush and trample of the crowd, the beating of drums, the screaming of pipes, deafening uproar. The crowns and the crystal rod were wrapped again and taken away. Kynon raised up the boy and struck off the chains of captivity. He mounted, with the boy beside him. Delgaun walked before him through the streets, and so did the outlanders.

The body of the old man was disre-

garded, except by some of Kynon's barbarians who wrapped it in a white cloth and took it away.

Kynon of Shun came in triumph to Delgaun's palace. Standing beside the litter, he gave his hand to the woman, who stepped out and walked beside him through the bronze door.

The women of Shun are tall and strong, bred to stand beside their men in war as well as love, and this red-haired daughter of the Drylands was enough to stop a man's heart with her proud step and her white shoulders, and her eyes that were the color of smoke. Stark's gaze followed her from a distance.

Presently in the council room were gathered Delgaun and the outlanders, Kynon and his bright-haired queen—and no other Martians but those three.

Kynon sprawled out in the high seat at the head of the table. His face was beaming. He wiped the sweat off it, and then filled a goblet with wine, looking around the room with his bright blue eyes.

"Fill up, gentlemen. I'll give you a toast." He lifted the goblet. "Here's to the secret of the Ramas, and the gift of life!"

Stark put down his goblet, still empty. He stared directly at Kynon.

"You have no secret," said Stark deliberately.

Kynon sat perfectly still, except that, very slowly, he put his own goblet down. Nobody else moved.

Stark's voice sounded loud in the stillness.

"Furthermore," he said, "that demonstration in the square was a lie from beginning to end."

IV

STARK'S WORDS HAD THE effect of an electric shock on the listeners. Delgaun's black brows went up, and the woman came forward a little to stare at the Earthman with profound interest.

Kynon asked a question, of nobody in particular. "Who," he demanded, "is this great black ape?"

Delgaun told him.

"Ah, yes," said Kynon. "Eric John Stark, the wild man from Mercury." He scowled threateningly. "Very well—explain how I lied in the square!"

"Certainly. First of all, the Earth boy was a prisoner. He was told what he had to do to save his neck, and then was carefully coached in his part. Secondly, the crystal rod and the crowns are a fake. You used a simple Purcell unit in the rod to produce an electronic brush discharge. That made the blue light. Thirdly, you gave the old man poison, probably by means of a sharp point on the crown. I saw him wince when you put it on him."

Stark paused. "The old man died. The boy went through his sham. And that was that."

Again there was a flat silence. Luhar crouched over the table, his face avid with hope. The woman's eyes dwelt on Stark and did not turn away.

Then, suddenly, Kynon laughed. He roared with it until the tears ran.

"It was a good show, though," he said at last. "Damned good. You'll have to admit that. The crowd swallowed it, horns, hoofs and hide."

He got up and came round to Stark, clapping him on the shoulder, a blow that would have laid a lesser man flat.

"I like you, wild man. Nobody else here had the guts to speak out, but I'll give you odds they were all thinking the same thing."

Stark said, "Just where were you, Kynon, during those years you were supposed to be suffering alone in the desert?"

"Curious, aren't you? Well, I'll let you in on a secret." Kynon lapsed abruptly into perfectly good colloquial English. "I was on Terra, learning about things like the Purcell electronic discharge."

Reaching over, he poured wine for Stark and held it out to him. "Now you know. Now we all know. So let's wash the dust out of our throats and get down to business."

Stark said, "No."

Kynon looked at him. "What now?"

"You're lying to your people," Stark said flatly. "You're making false promises, to lead them into war."

Kynon was genuinely puzzled by Stark's

anger. "But of course!" he said. "Is there anything new or strange in that?"

Luhar spoke up, his voice acid with hate. "Watch out for him, Kynon. He'll sell you out, he'll cut your throat, if he thinks it best for the barbarians."

Delgaun said, "Stark's reputation is known all over the system. There's no need to tell us that again."

"No." Kynon shook his head, looking very candidly at Stark. "We sent for you, didn't we, knowing that? All right."

He stepped back a little, so that the others were included in what he was going to say.

"My people have a just cause for war. They go hungry and thirsty, while the City-States along the Dryland Border hog all the water sources and grow fat. Do you know what it means to watch your children die crying for water on a long march, to come at last to the oasis and find the well sanded in by a storm, and go on again, trying to save your people and your herd? Well, I do! I was born and bred in the Drylands, and many a time I've cursed the border states with a tongue like a dry stick."

"Stark, you should know the workings of the barbarian mind as well as I do. The men of Kesh and Shun are traditional enemies. Raiding and thieving, open warfare over water and grass. I had to give them a rallying point—a faith strong enough to unite them. Resurrecting the Rama legend was the only hope I had."

"And it has worked. The tribes are one people now. They can go on and take what belongs to them—the right to live. I'm not really so far out in my promises, at that. Now do you understand?"

STARK studied him, with his cold cat-eyes. "Where do the men of Valkis come in—the men of Jekkara and Bar-rakesh? Where do *we* come in, the hired braves?"

Kynon smiled. It was a perfectly sincere smile, and it had no humor in it, only a great pride and a cheerful cruelty.

"We're going to build an empire," he said softly. "The City-States are disorganized, too starved or too fat to fight."

And Earth is taking us over. Before long, Mars will be hardly more than another Luna.

"We're going to fight that. Drylander and Low-Canaller together, we're going to build a power out of dust and blood—and there will be loot in plenty to go round."

"That's where my men come in," said Delgaun, and laughed. "We low-Canallers live by rapine."

"And you," said Kynon, "the 'hired braves', are in it to help. I need you and the Venusian, Stark, to train my men, to plan campaigns, to give me all you know of guerrilla fighting. Knighton has a fast cruiser. He'll bring us supplies from outside. Walsh is a genius, they tell me, at fashioning weapons. Themis is a mechanic, and also the cleverest thief this side of hell—saving your presence, Delgaun! Arrod organized and bossed the Brotherhood of the Little Worlds, which had the Space Patrol going mad for years. He can do the same for us. So there you have it. Now, Stark, what do you say?"

The Earthman answered slowly, "I'll go along with you—as long as no harm comes to the tribes."

Kynon laughed. "No need to worry about that."

"Just one more question," Stark said. "What's going to happen when the people find out that this Rama stuff is just a myth?"

"They won't," said Kynon. "The crowns will be destroyed in battle, and it will be very tragic, but very final. No one knows how to make more of them. Oh, I can handle the people! They'll be happy enough, with good land and water."

He looked around then and said plaintively, "And now can we sit down, and drink like civilized men?"

They sat. The wine went round, and the vultures of Valkis drank to each other's luck and loot, and Stark learned that the woman's name was Berild.

Kynon was happy. He had made his point with the people, and he was celebrating. But Stark noticed that though his tongue grew thick, it did not loosen.

Luhar grew steadily more morose and silent, glancing covertly across the table at

Stark. Delgaun toyed with his goblet, and his yellow gaze which gave nothing away moved restlessly between Berild and Stark.

Berild drank not at all. She sat a little apart, with her face in shadow, and her red mouth smiled. Her thoughts, too, were her own secret. But Stark knew that she was still watching him, and he knew that Delgaun was aware of it.

Presently Kynon said, "Delgaun and I have some talking to do, so I'll bid you gentlemen farewell for the present. You, Stark, and Luhar—I'm going back into the desert at midnight, and you're going with me, so you'd better get some sleep."

Stark nodded. He rose and went out, with the others.

An attendant showed him to his quarters, in the north wing. Stark had not rested for twenty-four hours, and he was glad of the chance to sleep.

He lay down. The wine spun in his head, and Berild's smile mocked him. Then his thoughts turned to Ashton, and his promise. Presently he slept, and dreamed.

HE was a boy on Mercury again, running down a path that led from a cave mouth to the floor of a valley. Above him the mountains rose into the sky and were lost beyond the shallow atmosphere. The rocks danced in the terrible heat, but the soles of his feet were like iron, and trod them lightly. He was quite naked.

The blaze of the sun between the valley walls was like the shining heart of Hell. It did not seem to the boy N'Chaka that it could ever be cold again, yet he knew that when darkness came there would be ice on the shallows of the river. The gods were constantly at war.

He passed a place, ruined by earthquake. It was a mine, and N'Chaka remembered dimly that he had once lived there, with several white-skinned creatures shaped like himself. He went on without a second glance.

He was searching for Tika. When he was old enough, he would mate with her. He wanted to hunt with her now, for she was fleet and as keen as he at scenting out the great lizards.

He heard her voice calling his name.

There was terror in it, and N'Chaka began to run. He saw her, crouched between two huge boulders, her light fur stained with blood.

A vast black-winged shadow swooped down upon him. It glared at him with its yellow eyes, and its long beak tore at him. He thrust his spear at it, but talons hooked into his shoulder, and the golden eyes were close to him, bright and full of death.

He knew those eyes. Tika screamed, but the sound faded, everything faded but those eyes. He sprang up, grappling with the thing . . .

A man's voice yelling, a man's hands thrusting him away. The dream receded. Stark came back to reality, dropping the scared attendant who had come to waken him.

The man cringed away from him. "Delgaun sent me. He wants you—in the council room." Then he turned and fled.

STARK shook himself. The dream had been terribly real. He went down to the council room. It was dusk now, and the torches were lighted.

Delgaun was waiting, and Berild sat beside him at the table. They were alone there. Delgaun looked up, with his golden eyes.

"I have a job for you, Stark," he said. "You remember the captain of Kynon's men, in the square today?"

"I do."

"His name is Freka, and he's a good man, but he's addicted to a certain vice. He'll be up to his ears in it by now, and somebody has to get him back by the time Kynon leaves. Will you see to it?"

Stark glanced at Berild. It seemed to him that she was amused, whether at him or at Delgaun he could not tell. He asked, "Where will I find him?"

"There's only one place where he can get his particular poison—Kala's, out on the edge of Valkis. It's in the old city, beyond the lower quays." Delgaun smiled. "You may have to be ready with your fists, Stark. Freka may not want to come."

Stark hesitated. Then, "I'll do my best," he said, and went out into the dusky streets of Valkis.

He crossed a square, heading away from

the palace. A twisting lane swallowed him up. And quite suddenly, someone took his arm and said rapidly,

"Smile at me, and then turn aside into the alley."

The hand on his arm was small and brown, the voice very pretty with its accompaniment of little chiming bells. He smiled, as she had bade him, and turned aside into the alley, which was barely more than a crack between two rows of houses.

Swiftly, he put his hands against the wall, so that the girl was prisoned between them. A green-eyed girl, with golden bells braided in her black hair, and impudent breasts bare above a jewelled girdle. A handsome girl, with a proud look to her.

The serving girl who had stood beside the litter in the square, and had watched Kynon with such bleak hatred.

"Well," said Stark. "And what do you want with me, little one?"

She answered, "My name is Fianna. And I do not intend to kill you, neither will I run away."

Stark let his hands drop. "Did you follow me, Fianna?"

"I did. Delgaun's palace is full of hidden ways, and I know them all. I was listening behind the panel in the council room. I heard you speak out against Kynon, and I heard Delgaun's order, just now."

"So?"

"So, if you meant what you said about the tribes, you had better get away now, while you have the chance. Kynon lied to you. He will use you, and then kill you, as he will use and then destroy his own people." Her voice was hot with bitter fury.

Stark gave her a slow smile that might have meant anything, or nothing.

"You're a Valkisian, Fianna. What do you care what happens to the barbarians?"

Her slightly tilted green eyes looked scornfully into his.

"I'm not trying to trap you, Earthman. I hate Kynon. And my mother was a woman of the desert."

She paused, then went on sombrely, "Also, I serve the lady Berild, and I have learned many things. There is trouble coming, greater trouble than Kynon

knows." She asked, suddenly, "What do you know of the Ramas?"

"Nothing," he answered, "except that they don't exist now, if they ever did."

Fianna gave him an odd look. "Perhaps they don't. Will you listen to me, Earthman from Mercury? Will you get away, now that you know you're marked for death?"

Stark said, "No."

"Even if I tell you that Delgaum has set a trap for you at Kala's?"

"No. But I will thank you for your warning, Fianna."

He bent and kissed her, because she was very young and honest. Then he turned and went on his way.

V

NIGHT CAME SWIFTLY. STARK left behind him the torches and the laughter and the sounding harps, coming into the streets of the old city where there was nothing but silence and the light of the low moons.

He saw the lower quays, great looming shapes of marble rounded and worn by time, and went toward them. Presently he found that he was following a faint but definite path, threaded between the ancient houses. It was very still, so that the dry whisper of the drifting dust was audible.

He passed under the shadow of the quays, and turned into a broad way that had once led up from the harbor. A little way ahead, on the other side, he saw a tall building half fallen in ruin. Its windows were shuttered, barred with light, and from it came the sound of voices and a thin thread of music, very reedy and evil.

Stark approached it, slipping through the ragged shadows as though he had no more weight to him than a drift of smoke. Once a door banged and a man came out of Kala's and passed by, going down to Valkis. Stark saw his face in the moonlight. It was the face of a beast, rather than a man. He muttered to himself as he went, and once he laughed, and Stark felt a loathing in him.

He waited until the sound of footsteps

had died away. The ruined houses gave no sign of danger. A lizard rustled between the stones, and that was all. The moonlight lay bright and still on Kala's door.

Stark found a little shard of rock and tossed it, so that it made a sharp snicking sound against the shadowed wall beyond him. Then he held his breath, listening.

No one, nothing, stirred. Only the dry wind sighed in the empty houses.

Stark went out, across the open space, and nothing happened. He flung open the door of Kala's dive.

Yellow light spilled out, and a choking wave of hot and stuffy air. Inside, there were tall lamps with quartz lenses, each of which poured down a beam of throbbing, gold-orange light. And in the little pools of radiance, on filthy furs and cushions on the floor, lay men and women whose faces were slack and bestial.

Stark realized now what secret vice Kala sold here. Shanga—the going-back—the radiation that caused temporary artificial atavism and let men wallow for a time in beasthood. It was supposed to have been stamped out when the Lady Fand's dark Shanga ring had been destroyed. But it still persisted, in places like this outside the law.

He looked for Freka, and recognized the tall barbarian. He was sprawled under one of the Shanga lamps, eyes closed, face brutish, growling and twitching in sleep like the beast he had temporarily become.

A voice spoke from behind Stark's shoulder. "I am Kala. What do you wish, Outlander?"

He turned. Kala might have been beautiful once, a thousand years ago as you reckon sin. She wore still the sweet chiming bells in her hair, and Stark thought of Fianna. The woman's ravaged face turned him sick. It was like the reedy, piping music, woven out of the very heart of evil.

Yet her eyes were shrewd, and he knew that she had not missed his searching look around the room, nor his interest in Freka. There was a note of warning in her voice.

He did not want trouble, yet. Not until he found some hint of the trap Fianna had told him of.

He said, "Bring me wine."

"Will you try the lamp of Going-back, Outlander? It brings much joy."

"Perhaps later. Now, I wish wine."

SHE went away, clapping her hands for a slatternly wench who came between the sprawled figures with an earthen mug. Stark sat down beside a table, where his back was to the wall and he could see both the door and the whole room.

Kala had returned to her own heap of furs by the door, but her basilisk eyes were alert.

Stark made a pretence of drinking, but his mind was very busy, very cold.

Perhaps this, in itself, was the trap. Freka was temporarily a beast. He would fight, and Kala would shriek, and the other dull-eyed brutes would rise and fight also.

But he would have needed no warning about that—and Delgaun himself had said there would be trouble.

No. There was something more.

He let his gaze wander over the room. It was large, and there were other rooms off of it, the openings hung with ragged curtains. Through the rents, Stark could see others of Kala's customers sprawled under Shanga-lamps, and some of these had gone so far back from humanity that they were hideous to behold. But still there was no sign of danger to himself.

There was only one odd thing. The room nearest to where Freka sat was empty, and its curtains were only partly drawn.

Stark began to brood on the emptiness of that room.

He beckoned Kala to him. "I will try the lamp," he said. "But I wish privacy. Have it brought to that room, there."

Kala said, "That room is taken."

"But I see no one!"

"It is taken, it is paid for, and no one may enter. I will have your lamp brought here."

"No," said Stark. "The hell with it. I'm going."

He flung down a coin and went out. Moving swiftly outside, he placed his eye to a crack in the nearest shutter, and waited.

Luhar of Venus came out of the empty room. His face was worried, and Stark smiled. He went back and stood flat against the wall beside the door.

In a moment it opened and the Venusian came out, drawing his gun as he did so.

Stark jumped him.

Luhar let out one angry cry. His gun went off a vicious streak of flame across the moonlight, and then Stark's great hand crushed the bones of his wrist together so that he dropped it clashing on the stones. He whirled around, raking Stark's face with his nails as he clawed for the Earthman's eyes, and Stark hit him. Luhar fell, rolling over, and before he could scramble up again Stark had picked up the gun and thrown it away into the ruins across the street.

Luhar came up from the pavement in one catlike spring. Stark fell with him, back through Kala's door, and they rolled together among the foul furs and cushions. Luhar was built of spring steel, with no softness in him anywhere, and his long fingers were locked around Stark's throat.

Kala screamed with fury. She caught a whip from among her cushions—a traditional weapon along the Low Canals—and began to lash the two men impartially, her hair flying in tangled locks across her face. The bestial figures under the lamps shambled to their feet, and growled.

The long lash ripped Stark's shirt and the flesh of his back beneath it. He snarled and staggered to his feet, with Luhar still clinging to the death grip on his throat. He pushed Luhar's face away from him with both hands and threw himself forward, over a table, so that Luhar was crushed beneath him.

The Venusian's breath left him with a whistling grunt. His fingers relaxed. Stark struck his hands away. He rose and bent over Luhar and picked him up, gripping him cruelly so that he turned white with the pain, and raised him high and flung him bodily into the growling, beast-faced men who were shambling toward him.

Kala leaped at Stark, cursing, striking him with the coiling lash. He turned.

The thin veneer of civilization was gone from Stark now, erased in a second by the first hint of battle. His eyes blazed with a cold light. He took the whip out of Kala's hand and laid his palm across her evil face, and she fell and lay still.

He faced the ring of bestial, Shanga-sodden men who walled him off from what he had been sent to do. There was a reddish tinge to his vision, partly blood, partly sheer rage. He could see Freka standing erect in the corner, his head weaving from side to side brutishly.

Stark raised the whip and strode into the ring of men who were no longer quite men.

HANDS struck and clawed him. Bodies reeled and fell away. Blank eyes glittered, and red mouths squealed, and there was a mingling of snarls and bestial laughter in his ears. The blood-lust had spread to these creatures now. They swarmed upon Stark and bore him down with the weight of their writhing bodies.

They bit him and savaged him in a blind way, and he fought his way up again, shaking them off with his great shoulders, trampling them under his boots. The lash hissed and sang, and the smell of blood rose on the choking air.

Freka's dazed, brutish face swam before Stark. The Martian growled and flung himself forward. Stark swung the loaded butt of the whip. It cracked solidly on the Shunni's temple, and he sagged into Stark's arms.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Stark saw Luhar. He had risen and crept around the edge of the fight. He was behind Stark now, and there was a knife in his hand.

Hampered by Freka's weight, Stark could not leap aside. As Luhar rushed in, he crouched and went backward, his head and shoulders taking the Venusian low in the belly. He felt the hot kiss of the blade in his flesh, but the wound was glancing, and before Luhar could strike again, Stark twisted like a great cat and struck down. Luhar's skull rang on the flagging. The Earthman's fist rose and fell twice. After that, Luhar did not move.

Stark got to his feet. He stood with

his knees bent and his shoulders flexed, looking from side to side, and the sound that came out of his throat was one of pure savagery.

He moved forward a step or two, half naked, bleeding, towering like a dark colossus over the lean Martians, and the brutish throng gave back from him. They had taken more mauling than they liked, and there was something about the Outlander's simple desire to rend them apart that penetrated even their Shanga-clouded minds.

Kala sat up on the floor, and snarled, "Get out."

Stark stood a moment or two longer, looking at them. Then he lifted Freka to his feet and laid him over his shoulder like a sack of meal and went out, moving neither fast nor slow, but in a straight line, and way was made for him.

He carried the Shunni down through the silent streets, and into the twisting, crowded ways of Valkis. There, too, the people stared at him and drew back, out of his path. He came to Delgaun's palace. The guards closed in behind him, but they did not ask that he stop.

Delgaun was in the council room, and Berild was still with him. It seemed that they had been waiting, over their wine and their private talk. Delgaun rose to his feet as Stark came in, so sharply that his goblet fell and spilled a red pool of wine at his feet.

Stark let the Shunni drop to the floor.

"I have brought Freka," he said. "Luhar is still at Kala's."

He looked into Delgaun's eyes, golden and cruel, the eyes of his dream. It was hard not to kill.

Suddenly the woman laughed, very clear and ringing, and her laughter was all for Delgaun.

"Well done, wild man," she said to Stark. "Kynon is lucky to have such a captain. One word for the future, though—watch out for Freka. He won't forgive you this."

Stark said thickly, looking at Delgaun, "This hasn't been a night for forgiveness." Then he added, "I can handle Freka."

Berild said, "I like you, wild man." Her

eyes dwelt on Stark's face, curious, compelling. "Ride beside me when we go. I would know more about you."

And she smiled.

A dark flush crept over Delgaun's face. In a voice tight with fury he said, "Perhaps you've forgotten something, Berild. There is nothing for you in this barbarian, this creature of an hour!"

He would have said more in his anger, but Berild said sharply.

"We will not speak of time. Go now, Stark. Be ready at midnight."

Stark went. And as he went, his brow was furrowed deep by a strange doubt.

VI

AT MIDNIGHT, IN THE GREAT square of the slave market, Kynon's caravan formed again and went out of Valkis with thundering drums and skirling pipes. Delgaun was there to see them go, and the cheering of the people rang after them on the desert wind.

Stark rode alone. He was in a brooding mood and wanted no company, least of all that of the Lady Berild. She was beautiful, she was dangerous, and she belonged to Kynon, or to Delgaun, or perhaps to both of them. In Stark's experience, women like that were sudden death, and he wanted no part of her. At any rate, not yet.

Luhar rode ahead with Kynon. He had come dragging into the square at the mounting, his face battered and swollen, an ugly look in his eyes. Kynon gave one quick look from him to Stark, who had his own scars, and said harshly,

"Delgaun tells me there's a blood feud between you two. I want no more of it, understand? After you're paid off you can kill each other and welcome, but not until then. Is that clear?"

Stark nodded, keeping his mouth shut. Luhar muttered assent, and they had not looked at each other since.

Freka rode in his customary place by Kynon, which put him near to Luhar. It seemed to Stark that their beasts swung close together more often than was necessary from the roughness of the track.

The big barbarian captain sat rigidly

erect in his saddle, but Stark had seen his face in the torchlight, sick and sweating, with the brute look still clouding his eyes. There was a purple mark on his temple, but Stark was quite sure that Berild had spoken the truth—Freka would not forgive him either the indignity or the hang-over of his unfinished wallow under the lamps of Shanga.

The dead sea bottom widened away under the black sky. As they left the lights of Valkis behind, winding their way over the sand and the ribs of coral, dropping lower with every mile into the vast basin, it was hard to believe that there could be life anywhere on a world that could produce such cosmic desolation.

The little moons fled away, trailing their eerie shadows over rock formations tortured into impossible shapes by wind and water, peering into clefts that seemed to have no bottom, turning the sand white as bone. The iron stars blazed, so close that the wind seemed edged with their frosty light. And in all that endless space nothing moved, and the silence was so deep that the coughing howl of a sand-cat far away to the east made Stark jump with its loudness.

Yet Stark was not oppressed by the wilderness. Born and bred to the wild and barren places, this desert was more kin to him than the cities of men.

After a while there was a jangling of brazen bangles behind him and Fianna came up. He smiled at her, and she said rather sullenly,

"The Lady Berild sent me, to remind you of her wish."

Stark glanced to where the scarlet-curtained litter rocked along, and his eyes glinted.

"She's not one to let go of a thing, is she?"

"No." Fianna saw that no one was within earshot, and then said quietly, "Was it as I said, at Kala's?"

Stark nodded. "I think, little one, that I owe you my life. Luhar would have killed me as soon as I tackled Freka."

He reached over and touched her hand where it lay on the bridle. She smiled, a young girl's smile that seemed very sweet in the moonlight, honest and comradely.

It was odd to be talking of death with a pretty girl in the moonlight.

Stark staid, "Why does Delgaun want to kill me?"

"He gave no reason, when he spoke to the man from Venus. But perhaps I can guess. He knows that you're as strong as he is, and so he fears you. Also, the Lady Berild looked at you in a certain way."

"I thought Berild was Kynon's woman."

"Perhaps she is—for the time," answered Fianna enigmatically. Then she shook her head, glancing around with what was almost fear. "I have risked much already. Please—don't let it be known that I've spoken to you, beyond what I was sent to say."

Her eyes pleaded with him, and Stark realized with a shock that Fianna, too, stood on the edge of a quicksand.

"Don't be afraid," he said, and meant it. "We'd better go."

She swung her beast around, and as she did so she whispered, "Be careful, Eric John Stark!"

Stark nodded. He rode behind her, thinking that he liked the sound of his name on her lips.

THE Lady Berild lay among her furs and cushions, and even then there was no indolence about her. She was relaxed as a cat is, perfectly at ease and yet vibrant with life. In the shadows of the litter her skin showed silver-white and her loosened hair was a sweet darkness.

"Are you stubborn, wild man?" she asked. "Or do you find me distasteful?"

He had not realized before how rich and soft her voice was. He looked down at the magnificent supple length of her, and said,

"I find you most damnably attractive—and that's why I'm stubborn."

"Afraid?"

"I'm taking Kynon's pay. Should I take his woman also?"

She laughed, half scornfully. "Kynon's ambitions leave no room for me. We have an agreement, because a king must have a queen—and he finds my counsel useful. You see, I am ambitious, too! Apart from that, there is nothing."

Stark looked at her, trying to read her

smoke-grey eyes in the gloom. "And Delgaun?"

"He wants me, but . . ." She hesitated, and then went on, in a tone quite different from before, her voice low and throbbing with a secret pleasure as vast and elemental as the star-shot sky.

"I belong to no one," she said. "I am my own."

Stark knew that for the moment she had forgotten him.

He rode for a time in silence, and then he said slowly, repeating Delgaun's words,

"Perhaps you have forgotten something, Berild. There is nothing for you in me, the creature of an hour."

He saw her start, and for a moment her eyes blazed and her breath was sharply drawn. Then she laughed, and said,

"The wild man is also a parrot. And an hour can be a long time—as long as eternity, if one wills it so."

"Yes," said Stark, "I have often thought so, waiting for death to come at me out of a crevice in the rocks. The great lizard stings, and his bite is fatal."

He leaned over in the saddle, his shoulders looming above hers, naked in the biting wind.

"My hours with women are short ones," he said. "They come after the battle, when there is time for such things. Perhaps then I'll come and see you."

He spurred away and left her without a backward look, and the skin of his back tingled with the expectancy of a flying knife. But the only thing that followed him was a disturbing echo of laughter down the wind.

Dawn came. Kynon beckoned Stark to his side, and pointed out at the cruel waste of sand, with here and there a reef of basalt black against the burning white.

"This is the country you will lead your men over. Learn it." He was speaking to Luhar as well. "Learn every water hole, every vantage point, every trail that leads toward the Border. There are no better fighters than the Dryland men when they're well led, and you must prove to them that you can lead. You'll work with their own chieftains—Freka, and the others you'll meet when we reach Sinharat."

Luhar said, "Sinharat?"

"My headquarters. It's about seven days' march—an island city, old as the moons. The Rama cult was strong there, legend has it, and it's a sort of holy place to the tribesmen. That's why I picked it."

He took a deep breath and smiled, looking out over the dead sea bottom toward the Border, and his eyes held the same pitiless light as the sun that baked the desert.

"Very soon, now," he said, more to himself than the others. "Only a handful of days before we drown the Border states in their own blood. And after that . . ."

He laughed, very softly, and said no more. Stark could believe that what Berild said of him was true. There was a flame of ambition in Kynon that would let nothing stand in its way.

He measured the size and the strength of the tall barbarian, the eagle look of his face and the iron that lay beneath his joviality. Then Stark, too, stared off toward the Border and wondered if he would ever see Tarak or hear Simon Ashton's voice again.

For three days they marched without incident. At noon they made a dry camp and slept away the blazing hours, and then went on again under a darkening sky, a long line of tall men and rangy beasts, with the scarlet litter blooming like a strange flower in the midst of it. Jangling bridles and dust, and padded hoofs trampling the bones of the sea, toward the island city of Sinharat.

Stark did not speak again to Berild, nor did she send for him. Fianna would pass him in the camp, and smile sidelong, and go on. For her sake, he did not stop her.

Neither Luhar nor Freka came near him. They avoided him pointedly, except when Kynon called them all together to discuss some point of strategy. But the two seemed to have become friends, and drank together from the same bottle of wine.

Stark slept always beside his mount, his back guarded and his gun loose. The hard lessons learned in his childhood had stayed with him, and if there was a footfall near him in the dust he woke often before the beast did.

TOWARD morning of the fourth night the wind, that never seemed to falter from its steady blowing, began to drop. At dawn it was dead still, and the rising sun had a tinge of blood. The dust rose under the feet of the beasts and fell again where it had risen.

Stark began to sniff the air. More and more often he looked toward the north, where there was a long slope as flat as his palm that stretched away farther than he could see.

A restless unease grew within him. Presently he spurred ahead to join Kynon.

"There is a storm coming," he said, and turned his head northward again.

Kynon looked at him curiously.

"You even have the right direction," he said. "One might think you were a native." He, too, gazed with brooding anger at the long sweep of emptiness.

"I wish we were closer to the city. But one place is as bad as another when the khamsin blows, and the only thing to do is keep moving. You're a dead dog if you stop—dead and buried."

He swore, with a curious admixture of blunt Anglo-Saxon in his Martian profanity, as though the storm were a personal enemy.

"Pass the word along to force it—dump whatever they have to to lighten the loads. And get Berild out of that damned litter. Stick by her, will you, Stark? I've got to stay here, at the head of the line. And don't get separated. Above all, *don't get separated!*"

Stark nodded and dropped back. He got Berild mounted, and they left the litter there, a bright patch of crimson on the sand, its curtains limp in the utter stillness.

Nobody talked much. The beasts were urged on to the top of their speed. They were nervous and fidgety, inclined to break out of line and run for it. The sun rose higher.

One hour.

The windless air shimmered. The silence lay upon the caravan with a crushing hand. Stark went up and down the line, lending a hand to the sweating drovers with the pack animals that now carried only water skins and a bare supply of

food. Fianna rode close beside Berild.

Two hours.

For the first time that day there was a sound in the desert.

It came from far off, a moaning wail like the cry of a giantess in travail. It rushed closer, rising as it did so to a dry and bitter shriek that filled the whole sky, shook it, and tore it open, letting in all the winds of hell.

It struck swiftly. One moment the air was clear and motionless. The next, it was blind with dust and screaming as it fled, tearing with demoniac fury at everything in its path.

Stark spurred toward the women, who were only a few feet away but already hidden by the veil of mingled dust and sand.

Someone blundered into him in the murk. Long hair whipped across his face and he reached out, crying "Fianna! Fianna!" A woman's hand caught his, and a voice answered, but he could not hear the words.

Then, suddenly, his beast was crowded by other scaly bodies. The woman's grip had broken. Hard masculine hands clawed at him. He could make out, dimly, the features of two men, close to his.

Luhar, and Freka.

His beast gave a great lurch, and sprang forward. Stark was dragged from the saddle, to fall backward into the raging sand.

VII

HE LAY HALF-STUNNED FOR A moment, his breath knocked out of him. There was a terrible reptilian screaming sounding thin through the roar of the wind. Vague shapes bolted past him, and twice he was nearly crushed by their trampling hoofs.

Luhar and Freka must have waited their chance. It was so beautifully easy. Leave Stark alone and afoot, and the storm and the desert between them would do the work, with no blame attaching to any man.

Stark got to his feet, and a human body struck him at the knees so that he went down again. He grappled with it, snarl-

ing, before he realized that the flesh between his hands was soft and draped in silken cloth. Then he saw that he was holding Berild.

"It was I," she gasped, "and not Fianna."

Her words reached him very faintly, though he knew she was yelling at the top of her lungs. She must have been knocked from her own mount when Luhar thrust between them.

Gripping her tightly, so that she should not be blown away, Stark struggled up again. With all his strength, it was almost impossible to stand.

Blinded, deafened, half strangled, he fought his way forward a few paces, and suddenly one of the pack beasts loomed shadow-like beside him, going by with a rush and a squeal.

By the grace of Providence and his own swift reflexes, he caught its pack lashings, clinging with the tenacity of a man determined not to die. It floundered about, dragging them, until Berild managed to grasp its trailing halter rope. Between them, they fought the creature down.

Stark clung to its head while the woman clambered to its back, twisting her arm through the straps of the pad. A silken scarf whipped toward him. He took it and tied it over the head of the beast so it could breathe, and after that it was quieter.

There was no direction, no sight of anything, in that howling inferno. The caravan seemed to have been scattered like a drift of autumn leaves. Already, in the few brief moments he had stood still, Stark's legs were buried to the knees in a substratum of sand that rolled like water. He pulled himself free and started on, going nowhere, remembering Kynon's words.

Berild ripped her thin robe apart and gave him another strip of silk for himself. He bound it over his nose and eyes, and some of the choking and the blindness abated.

Stumbling, staggering, beaten by the wind as a child is beaten by a strong man, Stark went on, hoping desperately to find the main body of the caravan, and knowing somehow that the hope was futile.

The hours that followed were nightmare. He shut his mind to them, in a way that a civilized man would have found impossible. In his childhood there had been days, and nights, and the problems had been simple ones—how to survive one span of light that one might then struggle to survive the span of darkness that came after. One thing, one danger, at a time.

Now there was a single necessity. Keep moving. Forget tomorrow, or what happened to the caravan, or where the little Fianna with her bright eyes may be. Forget thirst, and the pain of breathing, and the fiery lash of sand on naked skin. Only don't stand still.

It was growing dark when the beast fell against a half-buried boulder and snapped its foreleg. Stark gave it a quick and merciful death. They took the straps from the pad and linked themselves together. Each took as much food as he could carry, and Stark shouldered the single skin of water that fortune had vouchsafed them.

They staggered on, and Berild did not whimper.

Night came, and still the khamsin blew. Stark wondered at the woman's strength, for he had to help her only when she fell. He had lost all feeling himself. His body was merely a thing that continued to move only because it had been ordered not to stop.

The haze in his own mind had grown as thick as the black obscurity of the night. Berild had ridden all day, but he had walked, and there was an end even to his strength. He was approaching it now, and was too weary even to be afraid.

He became aware at some indeterminate time that Berild had fallen and was dragging her weight against the straps. He turned blindly to help her up. She was saying something, crying his name, striking at him so that he should hear her words and understand.

At last he did. He pulled the wrappings from his face and breathed clean air. The wind had fallen. The sky was growing clear.

He dropped in his tracks and slept, with the exhausted woman half dead beside him.

THIRST brought them both awake in the early dawn. They drank from the skin, and then sat for a time looking at the desert, and at each other, thinking of what lay ahead.

"Do you know where we are?" Stark asked.

"Not exactly." Berild's face was shadowed with weariness. It had changed, and somehow, to Stark, it had grown more beautiful, because there was no weakness in it.

She thought a minute, looking at the sun. "The wind blew from the north," she said. "Therefore we have come south from the track. Sinharat lies that way, across the waste they call the Belly of Stones." She pointed to the north and east.

"How far?"

"Seven, eight days, afoot."

Stark measured their supply of water and shook his head. "It'll be dry walking."

He rose and took up the skin, and Berild came beside him without a word. Her red hair hung loose over her shoulders. The rags of her silken robe had been torn away by the wind, leaving her only the loose skirt of the desert women, and her belt and collar of jewels.

She walked erect with a steady, swinging stride, and it was almost impossible for Stark to remember her as she had been, riding like a lazy queen in her scarlet litter.

There was no way to shelter themselves from the midday sun. The sun of Mars at its worst, however, was only a pale candle beside the sun of Mercury, and it did not bother Stark. He made Berild lie in the shadow of his own body, and he watched her face, relaxed and unfamiliar in sleep.

For the first time, then, he was conscious of a strangeness in her. He had seen so little of her before, in Valkis, and almost nothing on the trail. Now, there was little of her mind or heart that she could conceal from him.

Or was there? There were moments, while she slept, when the shadows of strange dreams crossed her face. Sometimes, in the unguarded moment of waking, he would see in her eyes a look he

could not read, and his primitive senses quivered with a vague ripple of warning.

Yet all through those blazing days and frosty nights, tortured with thirst and weary to exhaustion, Berild was magnificent. Her white skin was darkened by the sun and her hair became a wild red mane, but she smiled and set her feet resolutely by his, and Stark thought she was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

On the fourth day they climbed a scarp of limestone worn in ages past by the sea, and looked out over the place called the Belly of Stones.

The sea-bottom curved downward below them into a sort of gigantic basin, the farther rim of which was lost in shimmering waves of heat. Stark thought that never, even on Mercury, had he seen a place more cruel and utterly forsaken of gods or men.

It seemed as though some primal glacier must have met its death here in the dim dawn of Mars, hollowing out its own grave. The body of the glacier had melted away, but its bones were left.

Bones of basalt, of granite and marble and porphyry, of every conceivable color and shape and size, picked up by the ice as it marched southward from the pole and dropped here as a cairn to mark its passing.

The Belly of Stones. Stark thought that its other name was Death.

For the first time, Berild faltered. She sat down and bent her head over her hands.

"I am tired," she said. "Also, I am afraid."

Stark asked, "Has it ever been crossed?"

"Once. But they were a war party, mounted and well supplied."

Stark looked out across the stones. "We will cross it," he said.

Berild raised her head. "Somehow I believe you." She rose slowly and put her hands on his breast, over the strong beating of his heart.

"Give me your strength, wild man," she whispered. "I shall need it."

He drew her to him and kissed her, and it was a strange and painful kiss, for their lips were cracked and bleeding from their

terrible thirst. Then they went down together into the place called the Belly of Stones.

VIII

THE DESERT HAD BEEN A pleasant and kindly place. Stark looked back upon it with longing. And yet this inferno of blazing rock was so like the valleys of his boyhood that it did not occur to him to lie down and die.

They rested for a time in the sheltered crevice under a great leaning slab of blood-red stone, moistening their swollen tongues with a few drops of stinking water from the skin. At nightfall they drank the last of it, but Berild would not let him throw the skin away.

Darkness, and a lunar silence. The chill air sucked the day's heat out of the rocks and the iron frost came down, so that Stark and the red-haired woman must keep moving or freeze.

Stark's mind grew clouded. He spoke from time to time, in a croaking whisper, dropping back into the harsh mother-tongue of the Twilight Belt. It seemed to him that he was hunting, as he had so many times before, in the waterless places—for the blood of the great lizard would save him from thirst.

But nothing lived in the Belly of Stones. Nothing, but the two who crept and staggered across it under the low moons.

Berild fell, and could not rise again. Stark crouched beside her. Her face stared up at him, white in the moonlight, her eyes burning and strange.

"I will not die!" she whispered, not to him, but to the gods. "I will not die!"

And she clawed the sand and the bitter rocks, dragging herself onward. It was uncanny, the madness that she had for life.

Stark raised her up and carried her. His breath came in deep sobbing gasps. After a while he, too, fell. He went on like a beast on all fours, dragging the woman.

He knew dimly that he was climbing. There was a glimmering of dawn in the sky. His hands slipped on a lip of sand and he went rolling down a smooth slope.

At length he stopped and lay on his back like a dead thing.

The sun was high when consciousness returned to him. He saw Berild lying near him and crawled to her, shaking her until her eyes opened. Her hands moved feebly and her lips formed the same four words. *I will not die.*

Stark strained his eyes to the horizon, praying for a glimpse of Sinharat, but there was nothing, only emptiness and sand. With great difficulty he got the woman to her feet, supporting her.

He tried to tell her that they must go on, but he could no longer form the words. He could only gesture and urge her forward, in the direction of the city.

But she refused to go. "Too far . . . die . . . without water . . ."

He knew that she was right, but still he was not ready to give up.

She began to move away from him, toward the south, and he thought that she had gone mad and was wandering. Then he saw that she was peering with awful intensity at the line of the scarp that formed this wall of the Belly of Stones. It rose into a great ridge, serrated like the backbone of a whale, and some three miles away a long dorsal fin of reddish rock curved out into the desert.

Berild made a little sobbing noise in her throat. She began to plod toward the distant promontory.

Stark caught up with her. He tried to stop her, but she would not be stopped, turning a feral glare upon him.

She croaked, "Water!" and pointed.

He was sure now that she was mad. He told her so, forcing the painful words out of his throat, reminding her of Sinharat and that she was going away from any possible help.

She said again, quite sanely, "Too far. Two—three days without water," She pointed. "Monastery—old well—a chance . . ."

Stark decided that he had little to lose by trusting her. He nodded and went with her toward the curve of rock.

The three miles might have been three hundred. At last they came up under the ragged cliffs—and there was nothing there but sand.

Stark looked at the woman. A great rage and a deep sense of futility came over him. They were indeed lost.

But Berild had gone a few steps farther. With a hoarse cry, she bent over what had seemed merely a slab of stone fallen from the cliff, and Stark saw that it was a carved pillar, half buried. Now he was able to make out the mounded shape of a ruin, of which only the foundations and a few broken columns were left.

For a long while Berild stood by the pillar, her eyes closed. Stark got the uncanny feeling that she was visualizing the place as it had been, though the wall must have been dust a thousand years ago. Presently she moved. He followed her, and it was strange to see her, on the naked sand, treading the arbitrary patterns of vanished corridors.

She came to a halt, in a broad flat space that might once have been a central courtyard. There she fell on her knees and began to dig.

Stark got down beside her. They scabbled like a pair of dogs in the yielding sand. Stark's nails slipped across something hard, and there was a yellow glint through the dusty ochre. Within a few minutes they had bared a golden cover six feet across, very massive and wonderfully carved with the symbols of some lost god of the sea.

Stark struggled to lift the thing away. He could not move it. Then Berild pressed a hidden spring and the cover slid back of itself. Beneath it, sweet and cold, protected through all these ages, water stirred gently against mossy stones.

AN HOUR later, Stark and Berild lay sleeping, soaked to the skin, their very hair dripping with the blessed dampness.

That night, when the low moons roved over the desert, they sat by the well, drowsy with an animal sense of rest and repletion. And Stark looked at the woman and said.

"I know you now."

"What do you know, wild man?"

Stark said quietly, "You are a Rama." She did not answer at once. Then she

said, "I was bred in these deserts. Is it so strange that I should know of this well?"

"Strange that you didn't mention it before. You were afraid, weren't you, that if you led me here your secret would come out? But it was that, or die."

He leaned forward, studying her.

"If you had led me straight to the well, I might not have wondered. But you had to stop and remember, how the halls were built and where the doorways were that led to the inner court. You lived in this place when it was whole. And no one, not even Kynon himself, knows of it but you."

"You dream, wild man. The moon is in your eyes."

Stark shook his head slowly. "I know."

She laughed, and stretched her arms wide on the sand.

"But I am young," she said. "And men have told me I am beautiful. It is good to be young, for youth has nothing to do with ashes and empty skulls."

She touched his arm, and little darts of fire went through his flesh, warm from his fingertips.

"Forget your dreams, wild man. They're madness, gone with the morning."

He looked down at her in the clear pale light, and she was young, and beautifully made, and her lips were smiling.

He bent his head. Her arms went round him. Her hair blew soft against his cheek. Then, suddenly, she set her teeth cruelly into his lip. He cried out and thrust her away, and she sat back on her heels, mocking him.

"That," she said, "is because you called Fianna's name instead of mine, when the storm broke."

Stark caught her. There was a taste of blood in his mouth. He reached out and caught her, and again she laughed, a peculiarly sweet, wicked sound.

The wind blew over them, sighing, and the desert was very still.

For two days they remained among the ruins. At evening of the second day Stark filled the water skin, and Berild replaced the golden cover on the well. They began the last long march toward Sinharat.

IX

STARK SAW IT RISING AGAINST the morning sky—a city of gold and marble, high on an island of rose-red coral laid bare by the vanished sea. Sinharat, the Ever Living.

Yet it had died. As he came closer to it, plodding slowly through the sand, he saw that the place was no more than a beautiful corpse, the lovely towers broken, the roofless palaces open to the sky. Whatever life Kynon and his armies might have foisted upon Sinharat was no more than the fleeting passage of ants across the perfect bones of the dead.

"What was it like before?" he asked, "with the blue water around it, and the banners flying?"

Berild turned a dark, calculating look upon him.

"I told you before to forget that madness. If you talk it, no one will believe you."

"No one?"

"You had best not anger me, wild man," she said quietly. "I may be your only hope of life, before this is over."

They did not speak again, going with slow weary steps toward the city.

In the desert below the coral cliffs the armies of Kynon were encamped. The tall warriors of Kesh and Shun waiting, with their women and their beasts and their shining spears, for the pipers to cry them over the Border. The skin tents and the long picket lines were too many to count. In the distance, a convertible Kallman spacer that Stark recognized as Knighton's made an ugly, jarring incongruity.

Lookouts sighted the two toiling figures in the distance. Men and women and children began to stream out across the sand, and presently a great cheering arose. Where he had looked on emptiness for days, Stark was smothered now by the press of thousands. Berild was picked up and carried on the shoulders of two chiefs, and men would have carried Stark also, but he fought them off.

Broad flights of steps were cut in the coral. The throng flowed upward along them. Ahead of them all went Eric John Stark, and he was smiling. From time to

time he asked a question, and men drew back from that question, and his smile.

Up the steps and into the streets of Sinharat he went, with a slow, restless stride, asking,

"Where is Luhar of Venus?"

Every man there read death in his face, but they did not try to stop him.

People came out of the graceful ruins, drawn by the clamour, and the tide rolled down the broad ways, the rose-red streets of coral, until it spread out in the square before a great palace of gold and ivory and white marble blinding in the sun.

Luhar of Venus came down the terraced steps, fresh from sleep, his pale hair tumbled, his eyes still drowsy.

Others came through the door behind him Stark did not see them. They did not matter Berild didn't matter, calling his name from where she sat on the shoulders of the chiefs. Nothing, no one mattered, but himself and Luhar.

He crossed the square, not hurrying, a dark ravaged giant in rags. He saw Luhar pause on the bottom step. He saw the sleep and the vagueness go out of the Venusian's eyes as they rested first on the red-haired woman, then on himself. He saw the fear come into them, and the undying hate.

Someone got between him and Luhar. Stark lifted the man and flung him aside without breaking his stride, and went on. Luhar half turned. He would have run away, back into the palace, but there were too many now between him and the door. He crouched and drew his gun.

Stark sprang.

He came like a great black panther leaping, and he struck low. Luhar's shot went over his back. After that there was no more shooting. There was a moment, terribly short and silent, in which the two men lay entangled, straining against each other in a sort of stasis. Then Luhar screamed.

STARK knew dimly that there were hands, many of them, trying to drag him away. He clung growling to the Venusian until he was torn loose by main force. He struggled against his captors, and through a red haze he saw Kynon's

face, close to his and very angry. Luhar was not yet dead.

"I warned you, Stark!" said Kynon furiously. "I warned you."

Men were bending over Luhar. Knighton, Walsh, Themis, Arrod. Stark saw that Delgaun was among them. He did not question at the time how word had gone back to Valkis and sent Delgaun racing across the dead sea bottom with his hired bravos to search for the red-haired woman. It was right that Delgaun should be there.

In short ragged sentences, Stark told how Luhar and Freka had tried to kill him, and how Berild had been lost with him.

Kynon turned to the Venusian. Death was already glazing the cloud-grey eyes, but it had not quenched the hatred and the venom.

"He lies," whispered Luhar. "I saw him—he tried to run away and take the woman with him."

Luhar of Venus, taking vengeance with his last breath.

Freka pushed forward, transparently eager to pick up his cue. "It is so," he said. "I was with Luhar. I saw it also."

Delgaun laughed. Cruel, silent laughter. He stood up, and looked at Berild.

Berild's eyes were blazing. She ignored Delgaun and spoke to Kynon.

"You fool. Can't you see that they hate him? What Stark says is true. And I would have died in the desert because of them, if Stark hadn't been a better man than all of you."

"Strange words," said Delgaun, "coming from a man's own mate. Perhaps Luhar did lie, after all. Perhaps it was not Stark who tried to run away, but you."

She cursed him, with an ancient curse, and Kynon looked at her sullenly. He said to the men who held Stark, "Chain him below, in the dungeons." Then he took Berild's arm and went with her into the palace.

Stark fought until someone behind him knocked him on the head with the butt of a spear. The last thing he saw was the face of Fianna, standing out from the crowd, wide-eyed with pity and love.

He came to in a place of cold, dry stone.

There was an iron collar around his neck, and a five-foot chain ran from it to a ring in the wall. The cell was small. A gate of iron bars closed the single entrance. Beyond was an open well, with other cell doors around it, and above were thick stone gratings open to the sky. He guessed that the place was built beneath some inner court of the palace.

There were no other prisoners. But there was a guard, a thick-shouldered barbarian who sat on the execution block in the center of the well, with a sword and a jug of wine. A guard who watched the captive Stark, and smiled.

Freka.

When he saw that Stark was awake, Freka lifted up the jug and laughed. "Here's to Death," he said. "For no one else comes here!"

He drank, and after that he did not speak, only sat and smiled.

Stark said nothing either. He waited, with the same unhuman patience he had shown when he waited for his captors under the tor.

The dim daylight faded from the gratings. Darkness came, and the pale glimmer of the moons. Freka became a silvered statue of a man, sitting on the block. Stark's eyes glowed.

The empty jug dropped and broke. Freka rose. He took the naked sword in his hand and crossed the open space to the cell. He lifted the outer bar away. It fell with a great echoing clang, and Freka entered.

"Stand up, Outlander," he said. "Stand up and face the steel. After that you'll sleep in a coral pit, and not even the worms will find you."

"Beast of Shanga!" Stark said contemptuously, and set his back against the wall, to give himself all the slack of the chain.

He saw the bright steel glimmer in the air, up and down again, but when the blow fell he had leaped aside, and the point struck ringing against the stone. Stark darted in to grapple.

His fingers slipped on hard muscle, and Freka wrenched away. He was a fighting man, and no weakling. The iron collar dug painfully into the Earthman's throat and

the heavy chain threw him backward. Freka laughed, deep in his chest. The sword glinted hungrily.

THEN, as though she had taken shape suddenly from the shadows, Fianna was in the doorway. The little gun in her hand made a hissing spurt of flame. Freka screamed once, and fell. He did not move again.

"The swine," Fianna said, without emotion. "Delgaun ordered him to wait, until it was sure that Kynon would not come down to talk to you. Then the story was to be that you had escaped somehow, with Berild's aid."

She stepped over the body and unlocked the iron collar with a key she took from her girdle.

Stark took her slender shoulders gently between his hands. "Are you a witch-girl, that you know all things and always come when I need you?"

She gave him a deep, strange look. In the dusk, her proud young face was unfamiliar, touched with something fey and sad. He wished that he could see her eyes more clearly.

"I know all things because I must," she told him wearily. "And I think that you are my only hope—perhaps the only hope of Mars."

He drew her to him, and kissed her, and stroked her dark head. "You're too young to concern yourself with the destinies of worlds."

He felt her tremble. "The youth of the body is only illusion, when the mind is old."

"And is yours old, little one?"

"Old," she whispered. "As old as Berild's."

He felt her tears warm against his skin, and she was like a child in his arms.

"Then you know about her," said Stark. "Yes."

He paused. "And Delgaun?"

"Delgaun also."

"I thought so," Stark said. He nodded, scowling at the barred moonlight in the well. "There are things I must know, myself—but we'd best get out of here. Did Berild send you?"

"Yes—as soon as she could get the key

from Kynon. She is waiting for you." She stirred Freka's body with her foot. "Bring that. We'll hide it in the pit he meant for you."

Stark heaved the body over his shoulder and followed the girl through a twisting maze of corridors, some pitch dark, some feebly lighted by the moons. Fianna moved as surely as though she were in the main square at high noon. There was the silence of death in these cold tunnels, and the dry faint smell of eternity.

At length Fianna whispered. "Here. Be careful."

She put out a hand to guide him, but Stark's eyes were like a cat's in the dark. He made out a space where the rock with which the ancient builders had faced these subterranean ways gave place to the original coral.

Ragged black mouths opened in the coral, entrances to some unguessed catacombs beneath. Stark consigned Freka to the nearest pit, and then reluctantly threw his sword in after him.

"You won't need it," Fianna told him, "and besides, it would be recognized. This will be a bitter night enough, without rousing the men of Shun over Freka's death."

Stark listened to the distant sliding echoes from the pit, and shivered. He had so nearly finished there himself. He was glad to follow Fianna away from that place of darkness and silent death.

He stopped her in a place where a bar of moonlight came splashing through a great crack in the tunnel roof.

"Now," he said, "we will talk."

She nodded. "Yes. The time has come for that."

"There are lies everywhere," said Stark. "I am tangled up in lies. You know the truth that is behind this war of Kynon's. Tell me."

"Kynon's truth is simple," she answered, speaking slowly, choosing her words. "He wants land and power, conquest. He will pour out the blood of his people for that, and after that he plans to use the men of the Low-Canals under Delgaun to keep the tribesmen in line. It may be true, as he said, that they would be satisfied with grazing land and water—but they would lose their freedom, and their pride, and I

think he has judged them wrongly. I think they would revolt."

She looked up at Stark. "He planned to use your knowledge, and then destroy you if you became troublesome."

"I guessed that. What about the others?"

"The outlanders? Use them, keep them as subordinates, or pay them off. Kill them, if necessary."

"Now," said Stark. "What of Delgaun and Berild?"

Fianna said softly, "Their truth, too, is simple. They took Kynon's idea of empire, and stretched it further. It was Delgaun's idea to bring the strangers in. They would use Kynon and the tribes until the victory was won. Then they would do away with Kynon and rule themselves—with the outlanders and their ships and their powerful weapons to oppress Low-Canaler and Drylander alike.

"That way, they could rape a world. More outland vultures would come, drawn by the smell of loot. The Martian men would fight as long as there was the hope of plunder—after that, they would be slaves to hold the empire. Their masters would grow fat on tribute from the City-States and from the men of Earth who have built here, or who wish to build. An evil plan—but profitable."

Stark thought about Knighton and Walsh of Terra, Themis of Mercury, Arrod of Callisto Colony. He thought of others like them, and what they would do, with their talons hooked in the heart of Mars. He thought of Delgaun's yellow eyes.

He thought of Berild, and he was sick with loathing.

Fianna came close to him, speaking in a different tone that had care and anxiety only for him.

"I have told you this, because I know what Berild plans. Tonight—oh, tonight is a black and evil time, and death waits in Sinharat! It is very close to me, I know. And you must follow your own heart, Eric John Stark. I cannot tell you more."

He kissed her again, because she was sweet and very brave. Then she led him on through the dark labyrinth, to where

Berild was waiting, with her dangerous beauty and all the evil of the ages in her soul.

X

THEY CAME OUT OF THE darkness so suddenly that Stark blinked in the unaccustomed light of torches set in great silver sconces on the walls.

The floor had been artificially smoothed, but otherwise this crypt was as the eroding action of the sea had shaped it out of the coral reef. It was not large, and it was like a cavern in a fairy tale, walled and roofed with the fantastic wreathing shapes of the rose-red coral. At one end there was a golden coffer set with flaming jewels.

Berild was there. Her wonderful hair was dressed and shining, and her body was clothed all in white, her arms and shoulders warm bronze from the kiss of the desert sun.

Kynon was there, also. He stood motionless and silent, and he did not so much as turn his head when Fianna and Stark came in. His eyes were wide open and blank as a blind man's.

"I have been waiting," said Berild, "and the time is short."

She seemed angry and impatient, and Stark said, "Freka is dead. It was necessary to hide his body."

She nodded and turned to the girl. "Go now, Fianna."

Fianna bent her head and went away. She did not look at Stark. It was as though she had no interest in anything that happened.

Stark looked at Kynon, who had not moved or spoken.

"He is safe enough," said Berild, answering Stark's unspoken question. "I drugged his wine so that his mind was opened to mine, and he is my creature as long as I will it."

Hypnosis, Stark thought. His nerves were beginning to do strange things. He wished desperately that he were back in the cell facing Freka's sword, which at least would deal with him openly and without guile or subterfuge.

Berild set her hands on Stark's shoulders, and smiled as she had done that night by the ancient well.

"I offer you three things tonight, wild man," she said. Her eyes challenged him, and the scent of her hair was sweet and maddening.

"Your life — and power — and myself."

Stark let his hands slip lightly down from her shoulders to her waist. "And how will you do this thing?" he asked.

"Easily," she said, and laughed. She was very proud, and sure of her strength, and glad to be alive. "Oh, very easily. You guessed the truth about me—I am of the Twice Born, the Ramas. I hold the secret of the Sending-on of Minds, which this great ox Kynon pretended to have. I can give you life now—and forever. Remember, wild man—forever!"

He bent his dark face to hers, so that their lips touched, and murmured, "Would I have you forever, Berild?"

"Until you tire of me—or I of you." She kissed him, and then added mockingly, "Delgaun has had me for a thousand years, and I am weary of him. So very weary!"

"A thousand years is a long time," said Stark, "and I am not Delgaun."

"No. You're a beast, a savage, a most magnificent cold-eyed animal, and that is why I love you." She touched the muscle of his breast, and then his throat, and added, "It's a pity there will never be another body like this one. We must keep it as long as we can."

"What is your plan?" Stark asked her. "Simply this. I will place your mind in Kynon's body. You will be Kynon, with all his power. You will be able then to keep Delgaun in check—later, you can destroy him, but not until after the battle is won, for we need the men of Valkis and Jekkara. You can keep your own body safe from him, and at the worst, if by some chance he should succeed in slaying the man he believes to be you, you will still be alive."

"And after the battle," said Stark softly. "What then, Berild?"

"We will rule together." She held his palms against hers. "You have strong

hands, wild man. Would you not like to hold a world between them—and me?”

She looked up at him, her eyes suddenly shrewd and probing. “Or do you still believe the nonsense you talked to Kynon, about the tribes?”

STARK smiled. “It’s easy to have principles when there’s no gain involved. No. I am as my name says—a man without a tribe. I have no loyalties. And if I had, would I remember them now?”

He held her, as she had said, between his hands, and they were very strong.

But even then, Berild could warn him.

“Keep faith with me, then! My wisdom is greater than yours, and I have powers you don’t dream of. What I give, I can take away.”

For answer, Stark silenced her mouth with his own.

When she drew away, she said rather breathlessly, “Let us hurry. The tribes are gathered, and Kynon was to have given the signal for war at dawn. There is much I must teach you between now and then.”

She paused with her hand on the lid of the golden coffer. “This is a secret place,” she said quietly. “Since before the ocean died, it has been secret. Not even Kynon knew of it. I think only Delgaun and I, the last of the Twice-Born, knew—and now you.”

“What about Fianna?”

Berild shrugged. “She is only my servant. To her, this is only a little cavern where I keep my private wealth.”

She pressed a series of patterned bosses in intricate sequence, and there was the sharp click of an opening lock. A shiver ran up along Stark’s spine. The beast in him longed to run, to be away from this whole business that smelled of evil. But the man in him knelt at Berild’s wish, and waited, and did not flinch when the blank-eyed Kynon came like a moving corpse beside him.

Berild raised the golden lid. And there was a great silence.

On the slave block of Valkis, Kynon had brought forth two crowns of shining crystal, and a rod of flame. As glass is to diamond, as the pallid moon to the light of the sun, were those things to the reality.

In her two hands Berild held the ancient crowns of the Ramas, the givers of life. Twin circlets of glorious fire, dimming the shallow glare of the torches, putting a nimbus of light around the white-clad woman so that she was like a goddess walking in a cloud of stars. Stark’s whole being contracted to a point of icy pain at the beauty and the wonder and the terror of them.

She set one crown on Kynon’s head, and even the drugged automaton shivered and sighed at its touch.

Stark’s mind veered away from the incredible thing that was about to happen. It spoke words to him, hurried desperate words of sanity, about the electrical patterns of the mind, and the sensitivity of crystals, and conductors, and electromagnetic impulses. But that was only the top of his brain. At base it was still the brain of N’Chaka that believed in gods and demons and all the sorceries of darkness. Only pride kept him from cowering abjectly at Berild’s feet.

She stood above him, a creature of dreams in the unearthly light. She smiled and whispered, “Do not fear,”—and she placed the second crown upon his head.

A strange, shuddering fire swept through him. It was as though some chip of the primal heart of all creation had been set by an unguessed magic into the cells of the crystal. The force that shaped the universe and scattered forth the stars, and set the great suns to spinning. There was something awesome about it, something almost holy.

And yet he was afraid. Most shockingly afraid.

His brain was set free, in some strange fashion. The walls of his skull vanished. His mind floated in a dim vastness. It was like a tiny sun, glowing, spinning, swelling . . .

Berild lifted a crystal rod from the coffer, a wand of sorcerous fire. And now Stark’s thoughts had lost all track of science. A cloud of misty darkness flowed around him, thickened . . .

A great leaping flare of light, a distant echo of a cry that he did not recognize as his own, and then . . .

Nothing.

XI

HE WAS LYING ON HIS FACE, his cheek pressed against the cool coral. He opened his eyes, his mind groping for the shreds of some remembered terror. He saw, vaguely at first and then with terrible clarity as his vision became clear, a man lying close beside him.

A tall man, very strongly built, with skin burned almost to blackness by exposure. A man who looked at him with eyes that were startlingly light in his dark face . . .

His own eyes. His own face.

He cried out and struggled to his feet, trembling, staggering, and his body felt strange to him. He looked down upon the strangeness of another man's limbs, the alien shaping of flesh and sinew upon alien bones.

The face of the dark giant who lay upon the coral mocked him. It watched, but did not see. The eyes were blank, empty, without soul or intelligence.

The mind of Eric John Stark fought, in its alien prison, for sanity.

Berild's voice spoke to him. Her hand was on his shoulder—Kynon's shoulder . . .

"All is well, wild man. Do not fear. Kynon's mind is in your body, still sleeping at my command. And you are Kynon now."

It was not an easy thing to accept, but he knew that it was so, and he knew that he had wished it to be so. It was easier to be calm after he turned his back on the other.

Berild took him in her arms and held him until he had stopped shuddering, oddly like a mother with a frightened child. Then she kissed him, smiling, and said,

"The first time is hard. I can remember—and that was very long ago." She shook him gently. "Now come. We'll take your body to a place of safety. And then I must tell you all of Kynon's plans for those outside."

She spoke to the thing that lay upon the coral, saying, "Get up," and it rose obediently and followed where Berild led, to a tiny barred niche in a side passage.

It made no protest when it was left, locked safely in.

"Only I can give it back to you," said Berild softly. "Remember that."

Stark said, "I will remember."

He went with Berild to Kynon's quarters in the palace. He sat among Kynon's possessions, clothed in Kynon's flesh, and learned how Kynon's mind had planned to loose a red tide upon the peaceful cities of the Border.

Only a small part of his mind was attentive to this. The rest of it was concerned with the redness of Berild's hair and the warmth of her lips, and with the heady knowledge that it was possible to be alive and young forever.

Never to lose the pride of strength, never to know the dimming sight and failing mind of age. To go on, like a child in an endless playground, with no fear of tomorrow.

It was nearly dawn.

Berild rose. She had told him much, but not the things Fianna had told him, of the secret treachery she had planned with Delgaun. She helped Stark to clothe Kynon's body in the harness of war, with the longsword and the shield and the shining spear. Then she set her lips to his so that his borrowed heart threatened to choke him with its pounding, and her eyes were wondrously bright and beautiful.

"It is time," she whispered.

She walked beside him, as he had seen her beside Kynon in Valkis, stepping like a queen.

They came out of the palace, onto the steps where Luhar had died. There were beasts waiting, trapped for war, and an escort of tall chiefs, with pipers and drummers and link-boys to light the way.

Stark mounted Kynon's beast. It sensed the wrongness in him, hissing and rearing, but he held it down, and imperiously raised his hand.

Throbbing drums and skirling pipes, tossing flames where the link-boys ran with the torches, a clash of metal and a cheer, and Kynon of Shun rode down through the streets of Sinharat to the coral cliffs, with the red-haired woman at his side.

They were waiting.

THE men of Kesh and the men of Shun were gathered below the cliffs, waiting. Stark led the way, as Berild had told him to, onto a ledge of coral above them. Delgaun was there, with the outlanders and a handful of Valkisians. He looked tired and ill-tempered. Stark knew that he had been busy for hours with last-minute preparations.

The first pale rays of dawn broke across the desert. A vast ringing cry went up from the gathered armies. After that there was silence, a taut expectant hush.

There was no fear in Stark now. He was past that. Fear was too small an emotion for what was about to be.

He saw Delgaun's golden eyes, hot with a cruel excitement. He saw Berild's secret triumph in her smile. He looked down upon the warriors, and let the magnificent voice of Kynon ring out across the soundless air.

"There will be no war," he said. "You have been betrayed."

In the moment that was left to him, he confessed the lie of the Rama crowns. And then Berild, who was behind him now, had moved like a red-haired fury to drive her dagger into his heart.

In his own body, Stark might have escaped the blow. But the reflexes of Kynon were not as his. They were swift enough to postpone death—the blade bit deep, but not where Berild had wished it. He turned and caught her by the wrists, and said to Delgaun,

"She has betrayed you, too. Freka lies in a coral pit—and I am not Kynon."

Berild tore away from him. She spurred her beast toward the Valkisian. She would have broken past him, through the escort, and up the cliffs to safety in the tunnels under Sinharat. But Delgaun was too quick.

One hand caught in the masses of her hair. She was dragged screaming from the saddle, and even then her screams were not of fear, but of fury. She clawed at Delgaun, and he fell with her to the ground.

The tall chieftains of the escort came forward, but they were dazed, and confused by the anger that was rising in them. Delgaun's wiry body arched. He flung the

woman over the ledge, and what happened to her after that Stark did not see, nor wish to see.

He was shouting again to the barbarians, the tale of Delgaun's treachery.

Behind him on the ledge there was turmoil where Delgaun ran on foot between the beasts, and the outlanders made their try for safety. Below him in the desert, where there had been silence, a great deep muttering was growing, like the first growling of a storm, and the ranks of spears rippled like wheat before the wind.

And Stark felt the slow running out of Kynon's blood inside him, where Berild's dagger stood out from his back.

They had headed Delgaun away from the path up the cliff. The two loose mounts had been caught and held. They had tried to catch Delgaun, but he was light and fast and slipped away from them. Now he broke back, toward Kynon's great beast.

Knock the dying man from the saddle, charge through the milling chieftains, who were hampered by their own numbers in that narrow space . . .

He leaped. And the arms of Kynon, driven by the will of Eric John Stark, encircled him and held him and would not let him go.

The two men crashed to the ledge. Stark let out one harsh cry of agony, and then was still, his hands locked around the Valkisian's throat, his eyes intent and strange.

Men came up, and he gasped, "He is mine," and they let him be.

Delgaun did not die easily. He managed to get his dagger out, and gashed the other's side until the naked ribs showed through. But once again Stark's mind was free in some dark immensity of its own. He was living again the dream he had in Valkis, and this was the end of the dream. N'Chaka had a grip at last on the demon with yellow eyes that hungered for his life, and he would not let go.

The yellow eyes widened. They blazed, and then they slowly dimmed until the last flicker of life was gone. The strength went out of N'Chaka's hands. He fell forward, over his prey.

Below, on the sand, Berild lay, and her outspread hair was as red as blood in the fiery dawn.

The men of Kesh and the men of Shun flowed in a resistless tide up over the coral cliffs. The chieftains and the pipers and the link-boys joined them, hunting the outlanders and the wolves of Valkis through the streets of Sinharat.

Unnoticed, a dark-haired girl ran down the path to the ledge. She bent over the body of Kynon, pressing her hand to its heart. Tears ran down and mingled with the blood.

A low, faint moan came from the man's lips. Weeping like a child, Fianna drew a tiny vial from her girdle and poured three drops of pale liquid on the unresponsive tongue.

XII

HE HAD COME A LONG WAY. He had been down in the deep black valleys of the Place of Darkness, and the iron frost was in his bones. He had climbed the bitter mountains where no creature of the Twilight Belt might go and live.

There was light, now. He had been lost and wandering, but he had won back to the light. His tribe, his people would be waiting for him. But he knew that he would never see them.

He remembered, then, with the old terrible loneliness, that they were not truly his people. They had raised him, but they were not of his blood.

And he remembered also that they were dead, slain by the miners who had needed all the water of the valley for themselves. Slain by the miners who had taken N'Chaka and put him in a cage.

With a start of terror, he thought he was again in that cage, with the leering bearded faces peering in at him. But in the blinding dazzle of light he could see no bars.

There was only one face. The anxious, pitying face of a girl.

Fianna.

His brain began to clear. Memory returned bit by bit, the fragments fitting themselves gradually into place.

Kynon. Delgaun. Berild. Sinharat, the Ever-Living.

He remembered now with perfect clar-

ity that he was dying, and it seemed a terrible thing to die in the body of another man. For the first time, fully, he felt the separation from his own flesh. It seemed a blasphemous thing, more terrible than death.

Fianna was weeping. She stroked his hair, and whispered, "I am so glad. I was afraid—afraid you would never wake."

He was touched, because he knew that she loved him and would be sad. He lifted his hand to touch her face, to comfort her.

He saw the fingers of that hand, dark against her cheek. Dark . . .

His own fingers. His own hand.

He was not on the ledge. He was back in the coral crypt beneath the palace. The light that had dazzled his eyes was not the sun, but only the flare of torches.

He sat up, his heart pounding wildly.

Kynon of Shun lay beside him on the coral. He was quite dead, his head encircled by a crown of fire, his side open to the white bone where Delgaun's blade had struck.

The wound that Kynon himself had never felt.

The golden coffer was open. The second crown lay near Fianna, with the rod beside it.

Stark looked at her, deep into her eyes. Very softly he said, "I would not have dreamed it."

"You will understand, now—many things," she said. "And I was glad of my power today, because I could truly give you life!"

She rose, and he saw that she was very tired. Her voice was dull, as though it counted over old things that no longer mattered.

"You see why I was afraid. If *they* had ever suspected that I, too, was of the Twice-Born . . . Berild or Delgaun, each alone, I might have destroyed, but I could not destroy both of them. And if I had, there was still Kynon. You did what I could not, Eric John Stark."

"Why were you against them, Fianna? How were you proof against the poison that made them what they were?"

She answered angrily, "Because I am weary of evil, of scheming for power and

shedding the blood of men as though they were sheep! I am no better than Berild was. I, too, have lived a long time, and my hands are not clean." But perhaps, by what you helped me do, I have made up a little for my sins."

She paused, her thoughts turned darkly inward, and it was strange to see the shadow of age touching her sweet young face. Then she said, very slowly, like an old, old woman speaking,

"I am weary of living. No matter where I go, I am a stranger. You can understand that, though not so well as I. There is an end to pleasure, and after that only loneliness is left.

"I have remembered that I was human once. That is why I set myself against their plan of empire. After all these ages I have come round full circle to the starting point, and things seem to me now as they seemed then, before I was tempted by the Sending-on of Minds.

"It is a wicked thing!" she cried suddenly. "Against nature and the gods, and it has never brought anything but evil!"

She caught up the rod and held it in her hands.

"This is the last," she said. "Cities die, and nations perish, and material things, even such as these, are destroyed. One by one the Twice-Born have perished also, through accident or swift disease or murder, as Berild would have slain Delgaun. Now only this, and I, are left."

QUITE SUDDENLY, she flung the rod against the coral, and it broke in a cloudy flame and a tinkling of crystal shards. Then, one by one, she broke the crowns.

She stood still for a long moment. Then she whispered, "Now only I am left."

Again there was silence, and Stark was shaken by the magnitude of the thing that she had done. Her slim girl's body somehow took on the stature of a goddess.

After a while he went to her and said awkwardly, "I have not thanked you, Fianna. You brought me here, you saved me . . ."

"Kiss me once, then," she answered, and raised her lips to his. "For I love you, Eric John Stark—and that is the pity of it. Because I am not for you, nor for any man."

He kissed her, very tenderly, and there was the bitter taste of tears on her soft lips.

"Now come," she whispered, and took his hand.

She led him back through the labyrinth, into the palace, and then out again into the streets of Sinharat. Stark saw that it was sunset, and that the city was deserted. The tribes of Kesh and Shun had broken camp and gone.

There was a beast ready for him, supplied with food and water. Fianna asked him where he wished to go, and pointed the way to Tarak.

"And you?" he asked. "Where will you go, little one?"

"I have not thought." She lifted her head, and the wind played with her dark hair. She did not smile, and yet suddenly Stark knew that she was happy.

"I am free of a great burden," she whispered. "I shall stay here for a while, and think, and after that I shall know what to do. But whatever it is there will be no evil in it, and in the end I shall rest."

He mounted, and she looked up at him, with a look that wrung his heart although it was not sad.

"Go now," she said, "and the gods go with you."

"And with you." He bent and kissed her once again, and then rode away, down to the coral cliffs.

Far out on the desert he turned and looked back, once, at the white towers of Sinharat rising against the larger moon.



The Madcap Metalloids

By W. V. ATHANAS



"Squad, Right Face! Forward MARCH! HALT!"

Plucked from the space-lanes by its ravaging magnetism, the two intrepid Terrans defied the death of this deadly radioactive worldlet by playing games with the roly-poly natives!

JONATHAN DRAKE SWAM BACK to consciousness as a bubble rises through molasses—slowly, and with great effort. His arms lay heavily on the padded rests of the shock-chair, and his lids drooped persistently despite the shouted commands of his brain. A bubble of

air rose reluctantly up his throat to operate his paralyzed vocal cords.

"Doc," he croaked. "Doc?" The words bounced off the polished metal walls of the room. There was no sound after that but the soft purr of the control board.

Jonathan walked his hand along the arm

rest like a spider, each finger a leg drawing the weighted hand a step further like a tremendous body. Finally a finger found the cup of the release button, and the pneumatic pads fell free of thigh, belly and chest. He slid the button forward and the shock-seat tilted him forward and decanted him gently onto the floor.

He could hear Doc breathing now, the sound of it harsh above the quiet humming of the dynamics, and he rolled on over and heaved his body off the floor with both arms.

"Puny," he muttered to himself. "Weak as a baby. Must have been a rough landing."

He fought his way to his hands and knees, but his body rebelled at the task of rising to his feet.

This is getting to where it ain't funny, he thought, and scrambled with great effort to the control board.

He had a look at the G-gauge and whistled softly. 3.4! *Leaping Luna, no wonder!* He forced his hand to the knurled knob of the control lever and clicked it down four notches. He held it there a moment, then eased it back a fraction by twisting the knob. The dynamics' hum rose a note and the weight began to fall from him.

He stepped swiftly to the other shock-chair and released the restrainers with one impatient stabbing finger. Doc had a bluish tinge about his mouth and his breathing was a bit ragged.

"Doc," said Jon sharply. He thumbed one of Doc's eyes open and studied the pupil. "Too much deceleration," he muttered, and wheeled to the black kit on the wall.

His eye caught the visi-plate over the control panel in passing, and he gave the bleak plain it showed a casual glance. Something round and black traveled across the field of vision, but was gone almost as soon as it caught his attention. He flicked a quick look to see that the automatic cameras were recording, and returned to Doc.

Doc made no response to the jab of the needle, but within ten seconds the color flooded to his face and he snapped his head up with alert attention.

"We made it," said Doc with instant comprehension. Doc was bald as an egg, though he was not yet thirty-five, and his lips were red and full and smiled easily. Behind those twinkling blue eyes—as Jon knew full well—was a brain that operated at its peak during stress, a mind that knew neither dismay nor panic.

His eyes twinkled now with sharp inquiry. "How does it look, Jon?"

THE lean dark-haired pilot shrugged. "I haven't seen much of it yet. Instruments show that we aren't cracked—outer and inner hulls still holding pressure. Tremendous gravity, no atmosphere. Entire area slightly radio-active. Haven't had time to check the recording tapes yet. I blacked out about the same time you did."

Doc caught his lower lip between his white even teeth for a moment. Then he tilted himself out of the shock-chair and rolled the stiffness out of his broad shoulders. "Tapes first," he said.

Jon clipped another reel into the recorder and stopped the whirring of the one he wanted. He slipped it onto the reversing spindle, pulled out the tag-end inside and fed it into the slot. Then he tapped two cigarettes alight on his thumbnail, gave one to Doc and stepped back to watch.

The asteroid showed up with surprising suddenness out of the void that was deep space. Its outlines were blurry at first, but sharpened as the spotter focussed on it. It was traveling at tremendous speed, for the star patterns behind it changed even as they watched. The metallic voice of the sound track came in now, recording the instrument readings.

"Ship's course Z-point RD 3784. Object's course Z-point AD 1892." The speaker droned on with data, speed of ship, computed speed of object, drive ratings. Then: "Collision course. Collision course. Repeating. Collision course."

The black mass of the asteroid shifted on the screen and momentarily went out of focus as the ship spun on its axis and the rear viewers took over. Then the scene was streaked with flame as the main jets put on full emergency deceleration.

The rest of the recording tape was nightmarish. The flaring of the jets stuttered—then stopped. The dispassionate mechanical voice of the speaker reported the main converter feed jammed, and almost instantly reported that auxiliary units were operating.

Doc shuddered reminiscently at this. He recalled the tortuous crawl through the tunnel into the converter room, the shoving of the screen ahead of him in the flickering blue glow of the room, the unjamming of the 'foolproof' feeding reel that had been installed especially for this exploration.

The twenty minutes it took had been enough. The ship lurched to the pull of this concentrated hulk of God-knew-what, and went into a tight orbit around the asteroid.

They were just too close. They came in lower and lower, and finally Jon threw on full power. Hobson's choice. Fall into the mass or kill themselves with high-G deceleration. Jon chose deceleration.

Both pairs of eyes watched the changing pictures with fascinated gaze. This was where they had blacked out.

It was sheer luck. The tape showed that they had gone tumbling across the bleak land below in a crazy pinwheeling motion. The nose dropped forward into the line of flight just as the belly of the ship slammed into the plain. For perhaps fifty Earth miles the ship cut its screaming swath across the bosom of the naked plain. Then motion stopped, and the tape showed nothing but the dead land for minute after minute.

"All right," said Doc, and Jon reached for the switch.

THEN motion showed on the screen. A sphere came out of the side, rolled up to the nose of the ship, hesitated, then rolled on almost out of the range of the lens. Then it simply disappeared. The tape whirled on to its end, and the machine clicked off.

"Now what in the name of the Sacred Blink of Venus," said Jon, "was that?"

"I pass," replied Doc. "Let's see that again."

They saw it again. And again. What

appeared to be a solid sphere of shiny black metal rolled across the plain, paused before the nose of the ship, rolled on—and simply disappeared!

"Well," said Doc at last, "this is still Exploration Unit X-3. First we eat, then we start getting this all down on tapes. Then we check the ship, and maybe we take a look-see around. Then we get the hell out of here. But first we eat."

Jon busied himself breaking out the rations. This consisted of picking two tins out of the locker, rapping them sharply on the rod that protruded from the case and setting them aside. In about thirty seconds the tins emitted a tired sigh and the lids raised slightly. The portions of food, each in its own clear plastic bag, were hot and ready.

Doc dropped his postprandial cigarette into the disposal slot and came to his feet.

"On your feet, Flyboy," he ordered. "Plenty workee, so chop chop, up and at it."

"Slave driver," sneered Jon. He squirmed into his antirad suit. He poised the helmet and fired his blast. "I gotta sweat my head off, back there, and you play with tapes up here. Talk about your men and boys. Hah!" And he dogged down the helmet. He could see Doc's lips moving and grinned pleasantly. He made motions to show that he wasn't hearing a word.

He was still grinning when he undogged the tunnel lock and closed it behind him. Between the double doors, he twisted his body in the cramped space to undog the second door. When it swung open, he had to crawl through the narrow opening into the tunnel. He thrust head and shoulders into the opening, and the weight of the world fell on him. He was jammed against the floor with an unbearable weight, and the threshold of the lock-door was slowly cutting him in two.

"Doc!" he screamed into the mouthpiece in his helmet. "Doc, give me a hand!" Then a cold hand closed over his heart.

The transmitter was off! In his horseplay he had not turned the knob, and now his hands were welded to the floor by the crushing weight.

He lashed out frantically with his lead-

soled feet, for they could still move. He tried to pound the lead soles in the distress code, but the pain of his crushed ribs was telegraphing down his nerves and the rhythm was erratic.

Here it comes, he thought bleakly, and a black wave curled over his thoughts.

He caught his breath and gagged. He looked up into Doc's anxious eyes and pulled the mask that was feeding him oxygen off his face.

"Whoosh," he said. "What was that?"

"Just plain gravity," replied Doc. "The Stable-G unit just covers the flight-compartment here, as you well know. When you stuck your head into the tunnel, you went over the edge, and the part of you that was in the tunnel must have weighed tons. I had to put a power winch on you to drag you out. Wonder it didn't pull you in two. We'd have thought of that if we both hadn't been trying to be funny." They considered this soberly for some minutes.

"Well," said Jon, raising a soothing hand to his aching neck, "that takes care of that. The drive compartment is out of bounds for us until we can get Stable-G into that tunnel."

"Yes," said Doc shortly. He turned to the rack where he had been working. He tossed the correlation tapes to Jon.

"Read 'em and weep," he said grimly.

Jon skimmed the tapes quickly. Twice he went back and checked the cold merciless facts. Finally he looked up and took a deep breath. It was unescapable fact, this asteroid was radioactive. It was only a matter of time until the ship would be contaminated.

"How long?" He forced his voice into steadiness.

Doc tapped a cigarette alight and took a deep lungful of smoke. He pursed his lips and gazed at the glowing end with deep distaste. "Between three and four days," he said slowly. "Say seventy-two hours to be safe."

"Well," said Jon, "let's see about getting this can the hell out of here." He settled himself in his seat and his experienced hands ran smoothly over the multitude of controls.

The amber READY light slowly slid through the spectrum until it reached

green. Then the red warning lights came on above the firing switches.

"Set," he said over his shoulder, and Doc slid into his shock-chair and clicked the switch. "Right," said Doc.

Jon flipped the three toggle switches and shoved the red power lever full ahead. The ship quivered, and the tiny shudders of strain telegraphed their way up to Jon's sensitive nerves. But the ship moved not at all. Jon cursed softly and threw the auxiliaries on. The sense of strain grew until it was nearly unbearable. The ship edged ahead, six inches, six more, then the warning lights began to pop on above the control panel.

Jon groaned, and cut power. He swiveled around.

"That's all," he said, "unless you want to get out and push." They unstrapped silently and lighted cigarettes without looking at each other. Unconsciously their eyes went to the Geiger. It clicked softly, and the sensitive needle jumped half across the dial and fell back. The needle of the accumulator dial was already lifting off the pin. Again the Geiger clicked and the needle jumped.

"Well," said Doc tiredly, "let's start getting it down on record tape. It may do some good someday."

THE transmitter was set on automatic, and was tirelessly throwing out its XER, XER, XER, in Interplanetary Code. But only a hissing roar came from the speaker tuned to the Explocenter channel. Doc got up and turned the volume down. He rubbed his hands together briskly.

"Let's go out and have a look-see," he suggested.

"You nuts?" inquired Jon sourly. "We'd be squashed like a couple of bugs the second we step off Stable-G."

"Ole Doc thought about that. We put a small Stable-G unit on each foot of a space suit and run them off the dynamics in the suit. By coupling the secondary off the S-G unit on the right foot to the metal suit, and the primary of the left one ditto, we can convert the whole suit into a S-G, and be as safe as if we were in church. Just to be safe, we'll hook up a suit and shove it into the air-lock to test it."

It worked.

Doc insisted on being the first out. He ran a loop of eighth-inch shielded warping line through the towing rings on the shoulders of his suit and grounded the shielding to the suit with a dab of welding metal.

"If I get stuck, Jon," his voice came tinnily through the phones, "haul me back with the winch. And whatever you do, watch the weld on your end of the shielding. There should be enough juice in it to keep it inert." Jon nodded, and Doc broke the seal on the outer door.

For a split-second the air glittered with pinpoints of light as the moisture in the airlock solidified. Then the crystals blinked out as the further cold broke the solids into their separate gasses and dispersed them. Doc slowly descended the ladder to the ground. His voice kept up a steady drone, feeding information to Jon and to the recorders tuned in on the control panel.

"I am clear of the ship now, by about twenty meters. Surface seems to be a sort of metallic sand—granulated at least—but solid as steel. My relative weight seems to be about 1.5, with S-G unit at maximum. The area seems to be absolutely barren, without even a hummock or dune in sight. The . . . Whup! There's one of those things—those spheres—just ahead, about thirty degrees off the ship's nose. Stand by—I'm coming back to the airlock."

Jon swiftly hauled in the slack in the line, hand over hand, and pressed the winch control to feed the slack onto the drum.

"Hold it," came Doc's voice. "It's disappeared again. Whup! Now there's one over here on my right, at about a hundred meters. Spherical shape, black, about five and a half or six meters in diameter . . . now it seems to be settling into the surface; assuming a hemispherical form . . . Whup! Disappeared again! Reel me in, Jon. We've got to get some high-speed shots of this."

It never occurred to either of them that there was no point in making these recordings. Explocenter hand-picked its men, and insatiable curiosity was the first requisite. Quick judgment and moral stamina

came next. And first, last, and always—"get it down on records".

The Geiger clicked softly on the bulkhead and the needle of the accumulator was working toward the red area, but neither paused to consider these things now. They had made their try, exhausted their resources.

BUT in the back of their minds was the knowledge that within a few months a statistician at Explocenter would mark Explounit X-3 "missing", and at the end of the year two more names would be added to the column at Explocenter; that shaft of gray venustron that stood beside the main entrance, whereon was the long, long scroll of names. Simple monument to the men of Explocenter who never came back.

"We can't take the big tele-lens outside," mused Doc, "so we'll have to record off the visi-plate. I'll go outside again, and spot for you, and you can line the plate on my bearings."

"Huh-uh. My turn," retorted Jon. "Why should you have all the fun? I'm going out this time, and you can shoot pictures to your little heart's content. Besides, I'm going to tuck my little personal camera into my helmet under my chin and get some shots on the spot."

"All right," snorted Doc. "But don't come crying to papa if you stub your toe. And look both ways before you cross the street. Here—let me blow your nose before you go out in the cold."

"Aw go to Helios, you retort-smasher. If I run into a ground squirrel, I'll skin him and bring you some hair."

Jon eased down the ladder and shuffled across the smooth surface until he was well clear of the ship.

"Nothing yet," he reported, and swept the horizon with his glance.

"I could have told you," said Doc nastily. "Your ugly face scared them away."

"Yeah," snorted Jon. "Every stenotyper at Explo has your beautiful mug pasted in the top drawer of her desk."

"Sure!" agreed Doc smugly.

"Well," said Jon impatiently, and under his breath. "Come on, you black boogers—I ain't got all day." Then he gulped.

For a huge black sphere materialized

about fifty meters to his left and rolled swiftly toward him. Jon beat a hasty retreat. He backed toward the ship, and jogged the camera under his chin to start it operating. The sphere paused a second, then rolled slowly after him.

"Steady," came Doc's voice in the phones. "I got a dis-ray on it."

Jon felt better, though he knew that a dis-ray blast this close to him would fricassee him too. He told Doc so.

"What's the difference?" inquired Doc, the first note of their doom in his voice. "Fast or slow—take your choice."

"Take your pictures, ground-hog," grunted Jon. "I'll do the heavy thinking around here."

"Don't sprain your neck with it, Fly-boy."

It was that dull black hopelessness in the back of Jon's mind that gave him the bravado that he showed then. He took a quick step toward the sphere.

"Scat," he snarled savagely, and waved his arms. "Shoo! Get lost!"

Then his mouth gaped. It was gone! Vanished!

"Doc!" he yelled, "did you see that?"

"Yup," came Doc's matter-of-fact voice. "Got it all here on the tape. Blip! Gone, just like before."

"That isn't what I mean," protested Jon. His brain was staggered by the half-formed thoughts that crowded it. "Now get this, Doc."

He shouted, "Come back here! Right here in front of me." For the space of three slow heartbeats nothing happened. Then, with the air of having been there all the time, the sphere materialized.

Breathing carefully, Jon said. "Roll toward me." The sphere hesitated a second, then came obediently toward him.

"Stop!" said Jon. The sphere was stock-still in the instant.

"Doc," cried Jon, excitement cracking his voice, "these star-blasted boogers can think!"

"Come on in out of the sun, Fly-boy," said Doc wearily. "The heat's getting you. It's coincidence. Or you moved to attract it, or something."

"No," protested Jon. "Now look. I'm going to cut off my trans, but I'll call my

shots first. I'm going to have it roll left, then right, then back to center. Got that? Left, right, and back to center. Over and out." And Jon cut off his transmitter.

HE stood stock-still and formed the impression in his mind. *Now roll to my left*, he thought. The blank sphere moved to the spot indicated. *Now to my right*. The huge sphere obeyed the mental commands with the joyous precision of a rookie Space Patrolman who has just learned his Parade Manual.

For fifteen minutes Jon put the hulking ball through its paces, and then as suddenly as it had appeared, the rapport was lost. The sphere trundled off across the plain, oblivious to Jon's commands, and finally settled to the hemisphere in the distance. Jon opened his trans.

"Yah," came Doc's disgusted voice. "He never jumped through no hoop."

"Drop it," retorted Jon curtly. "He got tired of it. Did you get it all down?"

"Every bit of it. Better come on in now, and we'll look it over."

Jon was suddenly tired, and he thought of the soft chairs in the Flight Room. But there would be that damned Geiger clicking, and the accumulator needle working into the red.

Jon knew suddenly that he was not going back to the ship. *What's the percentage in waiting for it*, he thought, *when I might as well be taking a look-see over the hill? Oh, come now Jon-me-lad, what hill?*

Into the trans he said, "Put a lamp in the window, Mother Dear. I'm going to look the sitchy-ation over. I'll hold on the line of the ship to the horizon, then bear right on the circle till I get back. Have supper ready—and please, no horse-radish in the broccoli."

Doc's voice came through with a trace of worry in it. "We shouldn't separate until we know more about this."

"To quote an outstanding authority," said Jon, "one Randall E. 'Doc' Martin, 'what's the difference? Fast or slow—take your choice'. End of quote."

"All right," agreed Doc tiredly. "But Jon, don't do, uh, anything rash."

"G'bye, Clabberhead," retorted Jon fondly. "Over and out."

Black depression settled on Jon as he trudged toward the horizon. Unwilling impressions returned to his brain. He remembered the crew of the XP-14. Their converter had been cracked in a jet blow-out. The commander was in the Rest Home on Venus. His head and shoulders looked like a mushroom. Colloids. Lucky, everybody said, just a light burn. His brain was still good.

So he carried his obscenity of a head around and found his way with a radar rod. Some of the others weren't so lucky; the flesh melted off their bones. Some of them had glowed before they died.

I'll stick with it until the time limit's up, he thought, then I'll blast my suit or cut the S-G circuit. Quick and easy.

He approached the sphere—hemisphere now—and wondered casually why it assumed that shape. Feeding, probably. But what would a metal ball eat? On the other hand, how did it receive his mental commands? *Drop it, Jonny, you're just going in circles.*

The sphere popped back into shape at his approach and circled coquettishly about him. It stopped before him and seemed to be waiting. Jon grinned.

"Booger, you ear-banger, you're bucking for stripes. All right . . . To the rear, MARCH!" Booger spun on his axis and trundled briskly away.

"Halt! By the right oblique, MARCH! RIGHT! . . . WHEEL! Halt! At Ease!" Booger came patiently to rest.

THE fancy came over Jon that it would indeed be a sight to organize a drill team of these spheres. "Booger," he thought suddenly, "where are your friends? You can't be the only one on this Godforsaken world. Go get 'em, Booger." Booger sat for a bit and then rolled playfully to and fro.

Jon phrased his thoughts carefully. He visualized a double row of Boogers, five to the row, before him. *Go get the rest of them, Booger*, he thought. Booger quivered, and then like snapping off a light tube, he was gone.

Within ten seconds, he popped back. Beside him a twin materialized, then two more.

Finally all ten of them were there, in two rows of five.

"Squad, Right Face!" ordered Jon. "Forward MARCH! HALT! Hey, dress up those ranks there." The right-end sphere in the front rank was at least two meters out of position. Booger broke ranks without orders and trundled swiftly to the side of the offending one, wheeled in a short arc and vigorously hunched him into position. Jon applauded with space-gloved hands.

"All right, Booger, you win. You are hereby promoted to Corporal of the Drake Irregulars. Now let's see some snappy close-order drill."

They drilled for some minutes, and then in a particularly tricky maneuver, the squad went to pieces. Two of them simply vanished. Three of them squatted—that was the only word Jon could find to fit—into hemispheres, and the rest either stopped or trundled about aimlessly.

"Well all right," said Jon with dignity. "Squad dismissed." He turned away to continue his tramp, and stopped with a startled gasp. There were spheres all about him. Ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty—there must be at least fifty of them, he calculated.

"Well, this is cozy," he said. "If I'd known I was working before an audience, I'd shown you some real drilling. Some audience, sitting on your hands."

He walked through the throng of them, giving them plenty of leeway in case one of them decided to roll his way. One, he thought it must be the one he had named Booger, followed him slowly. He got a good close-up look at several of them.

Smooth sleek balls they were, with shiny metallic surfaces, unbroken by any mark. No eyes, no feeding orifices, just smooth spheres.

What a bunch of bowling balls you'd make, he thought, *if we just had some pins*. Then he gasped.

At least six of them had extruded necks and were huge bowling pins!

"Now wait a minute," he gasped. "Do that again." They did. It seemed to be contagious. Within a few seconds he was surrounded by a veritable gallery of bowling pins, ten meters high!

He closed his eyes and counted to twenty—slowly. Then he snapped his eyes open quickly. They were still there.

"Doc was right," he groaned. "The heat's getting me." Then his whimsical humor made him think, *Booger, come here!*

One of the anonymous pins sprang back into a sphere and trundled to him. Jon made a sweeping gesture.

"Knock 'em down," he ordered. Booger took a rolling start and smashed into the ranks of pins with the enthusiasm of a runaway space tug. The earth-quaking impact shook Jon off his feet. He lay stretched on his belly laughing hysterically at the ludicrous sight.

Steady lad, some sane corner of his brain whispered. *Steady. This is no time to go to pieces.*

What the hell, he retorted to himself. *At least the condemned man had a hearty laugh.* But he pulled himself to his feet and trudged back to the ship.

DOC silently busied himself with the storage of the new reels after they had eaten.

"I found out how they do that disappearing act," he said finally. "It showed up on the high-speed shots. They shoot out a long pseudopod—like a wire. Then they snap back into a sphere at the other end. It's simply darned fast locomotion."

"Yes," agreed Jon, "and they can shape themselves into bowling pins and stuff too. And hold it. Their shape, I mean."

A thought was uncurling in Jon's mind. "Doc, do you suppose . . . by golly, it's *got* to work!"

And Doc was watching with astonished red-rimmed eyes as Jon slid through the neck of his space suit in its staped in the corner. Jon's voice faded out and came in over the speaker as the wrench settled the helmet in its seat and fell away.

"Warm up the converter, Doc. You'll have to handle that end this time. When I give the word, throw everything on—mains, auxiliaries, steering, everything. I'll have to do my end from the air-lock. And whatever you do, *don't cut acceleration until we're out of orbit and on course away.* Chop chop, chum."

Doc gaped at the door of the air-lock for a second, then shrugged and started closing switches. If the hottest spaceman of Explocenter said "try" . . . well, what could you lose?

Jon's voice came in over the speaker again. "Booger! Booger, you big lump, come here. Doc, I'm cutting off trans for a minute, it seems to work better when I think it to him."

The seconds ticked off into minutes, and the READY light was full green. Doc's hand trembled a bit on the firing levers, and he checked the restrainers in his shock chair for the third time.

Thirty seconds dragged by, and sweat budded on his forehead. "What in Helios is he . . ." he muttered, and then the speaker crackled with the one word: "NOW!"

Doc slammed the firing levers home, and instantly was driven deep into his shock-chair. Blackness washed out his trailing thought, *Leaping Luna, what is this doing to Jon? There is no shock-pad in the air-lock.*

It did plenty. It took all of Doc's skill and three weeks at Venusenter before the brash spaceman was clamoring for active duty.

"You see, Doc," he answered the question, "Booger and the rest were telepathic—one way at least. I had him gather about fifty of them, so if one or two quit on the job, it wouldn't make too much difference. Then I had them extrude themselves into cables clear over the horizon. I had them hook their . . . well, tail ends onto the fins of the ship. Then I gave them the word to get over the hill—fast. With our power, and their catapult action, it worked just like a Plutonian Cradle. Gave us that extra boost we needed."

"But what was their incentive?" inquired Doc. "What made them take your orders?"

Jon grinned broadly. "They ain't very smart. And life there is pretty monotonous. It tickled them to have some one give them something to do. Besides that, just before I passed the word to Booger, I commissioned him Commander-in-Chief of Drake's Irregulars. Authority-crazy, that Booger."

S. O. S. APHRODITE!

By STANLEY MULLEN



Coran struck her aside and lunged at Hamlin.

No wonder that signal stabbed out into the icy void. For it was a ship of hate and evil, and IP patrolman Steve Coran trusted only one person—after strapping her in her bunk!

ON THE HIGH METALLIC wall across the street was a big sign: VENUS TRANSPORT and a smaller sign which read CONTAMINATION AREA — KEEP OUT! Steve Coran

turned away from the window and faced the ISP official across the desk.

"From the time you leave this office, you'll be in deadly danger," the official said. "We aren't dealing with sporadic

cases of space piracy. This is a well-organized group of saboteurs, pirates and assassins backed by a ring of powerful and unscrupulous men, some of them in high places. They have more on their minds than mere looting. They have certain political objectives—and will stop at nothing to cause unrest, even war or revolution, to gain their ends. Fishers in troubled waters . . .”

Coran laughed harshly. “Doesn’t sound like a rest cure. Why’d you pick me for the job?”

The official opened a file drawer and riffled the cards. “You were recommended by the Ministry of Transport. I confess that I was dubious, because of your record. However, you were transferred from the Mars-Jupiter sector for the one reason that you’re not known here. Any of our regular security agents or the ISP men would be recognized at once. Our original idea was to place you aboard a rocket transport as a crewman to spy out the weak links in our defensive measures. But a matter of graver importance has come up. The assignments will overlap, but we can no longer give you official backing.”

“You’d better bring me up to date,” Coran said bluntly.

“The pattern is usually the same. Barratry. Three of the Venus transports have been deliberately wrecked and looted. Of plutonium, for the most part. Members of this criminal group have infiltrated the crew. Even trusted officers have been forced, by blackmail or other methods, to aid the plotters. We can trust no one, not even the captain.”

“I see. What is this other matter you spoke about?”

“Two days ago we arrested a man. The charge was barratry. We had no name, only a heliophoto from Venus. In his possession we found documents relating to political matters of vital importance. Release of the information contained in his portfolio would be disastrous at this time. It could cause chaos, perhaps even war.”

Coran grunted. “Such documents have no right to exist.”

“I agree. Unfortunately, this one does exist. And it’s no longer in our custody.

A woman, obviously an accomplice, got a blaster gun to him. Two ISP men were killed, and the prisoner escaped. The documents went with him. I don’t have to tell you that both of these fugitives must be apprehended or killed. And those papers must be brought back or destroyed. That’s your job.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Tact isn’t your long suit, is it, Lieutenant? You weren’t asked if you liked it. With two black marks against your record, you can’t afford an opinion. One more and you’re through as an officer in the space patrol—”

“I don’t like working out of uniform.”

“—and I wouldn’t count too much on a friendship with Paul Jomian, if I were you, Coran. He’s through here . . . even if he was kicked upstairs into the transport ministry. We no longer approve his methods. His rough-shod, undisciplined methods may get by in a frontier civilization like that of the outer planets, but nowadays we require efficiency and complete co-operation in the ISP. The time is past when an ISP officer can forget to change his uniform and go without shaving for days at a time.”

Coran’s eyes glittered. “There was more to Paul Jomian than gold braid and pretty uniforms. He was a man. And he got things done so a lot of you pretty-boys could sit on your fat chairs and keep your hair unmussed. For your information, those black marks on my record are for tearing apart superior officers who made cracks about Paul Jomian. Do you want me to turn in my badge?”

The official smiled poisonously. “That would be the easy way out for you, Coran. What’s the matter—the job too tough for you?”

“I can’t stand the smell of perfume around here. And the jobs don’t come too tough. Relax, big shot. I’ll run your stinking little errand for you. But it’s the last one. When I hand your two-vikdal bad man over to you, I’m through. Make out my resignation that way, and I’ll sign it before I leave.”

THE official laughed and stood up. “Resignation accepted—upon com-

pletion of assignment. You're a hard case, Coran. Up to a point, you're even right. But you don't belong any more, not in this part of the universe. It took pioneers like you and Jomian to bang the holes in our fishbowl world, but we need men with dull routine minds to bring order into it. Unofficially, I'm sorry to see you go. Nowadays a man conforms or he gets out."

"Skip the bouquets and the funeral oration. What's the layout on the job you want done?"

The official threw a file card across the desk. "There's the man you want. The picture won't help you much, since he'll probably be wearing a plastic face-mask."

Coran glanced at it and shrugged. "Not much to go on. Any other leads?"

"Yes." The official glanced at his wrist-chron. "We know that he will be on the Venus transport X-1143—the *Aphrodite*—which leaves in three hours. Probably the woman, too. Whatever happens, they must not reach Venus alive."

CORAN caught an implication in the words. "What do you mean 'Whatever happens'?"

"The *Aphrodite* is an emigrant ship. It's a government secret that she's carrying plutonium for the power plants on Venus, but we're afraid the information may have leaked out. You may as well know that we're on the spot. It's too late to cancel the shipment without serious economic repercussions. And we haven't found any way to protect the passenger-carrying ships. Even if we armed them, which is against Interplanetary Law, they're too slow to run and too unwieldy to maneuver. Too much mass."

"What about convoy?"

"We tried that last time. The ship was disabled and driven off-orbit. Then a group of fast cruisers of unusual design showed up. The space patrol drove them off and gave chase. It was a trick, of course, to decoy our ships into space, then the main body of pirates moved in and cleaned out the ship."

Coran laughed. "When you're catching rabbits you have to be smarter than the rabbits."

The official flushed. "We're handi-

capped by lack of ships and lack of competent personnel. This is your chance to be smarter than the rabbits. The man you want is obviously a member of the same group. If there is trouble, he will try to contact his friends. It's up to you to find him first, and if you fail that, to make sure that he does not escape or turn over the documents to anyone else. We'll have an ISP squadron following six hours behind the *Aphrodite*. If you need help, get a signal to them—by helioflash, if you can. I suggest you find the man first, and through him, locate the woman. From there on, you know what to do . . ."

"It's a dirty job. Even with frosting, it's simple butchery—no trial, no evidence. Now I know why the Martians consider an ISP man just a hired thug."

"That's all he is. You have your orders and, whatever your private opinions may be, I'm sure you'll agree that lives are unimportant when we're playing for such stakes."

"Lives never are when politicians start dealing from the bottom of the deck," Coran snarled bitterly.

The official shrugged. "I wouldn't know about that. I'm just a yes-man. You can discuss it with Paul Jomian—your politician friend—when you see him. He'll be on the *Aphrodite*."

"Have you figured out how I'm to get on the *Aphrodite*? If she's an emigrant ship, they'll take only married couples. The altruistic Company wants settlers to colonize Venus and build up their plague-spot plantations for them."

"That's your problem. Marry someone if you have to, or hire a fake wife. It's been done. Anything, just so you don't give away your official position. Now get going. You've less than three hours till take-off time."

Coran bent over the desk and signed his resignation with an elaborate flourish, put an inked thumbprint beside the name, then stalked to the door clothespinning his nose between thumb and forefinger. "That's time enough to blow this stink off me," he said carelessly, wiping the inky thumb on his uniform jacket.

The official laughed. "You're right. It does stink."

STEVE CORAN was conscious of the girl merely as an obstacle between him and the ticket window. She was young, expensively dressed and too well-groomed, with blue-white hair, a haughty manner, and an icy stare in her violet eyes.

"I was here first," she said coldly.

Coran bowed mockingly. "I don't like you either. Besides, I never hit a lady in public. I hope this won't lead to one of those shipboard romances."

The beehive activity of the ticket office slackened as take-off time drew near. Coran studied her back as she stood ahead of him in the line and repressed a desire to pinch her and find out if she were real. The weasel-faced clerk was tired and his tone of long-suffering patience had worn to a thread of annoyance.

"I've told you before, miss. I can't sell single tickets—the company rules do not permit any but married couples aboard an emigrant transport. We feel that unmarried women are trouble makers in a frontier society."

The girl made an arrogant gesture. "It's important. I must get to Venus. I don't care what it costs."

"Don't tell me. See the manager. I don't make the rules. Third office on the left. But you'd better hurry. I've only one double passage left."

Coran tapped the girl on her shoulder. She glared at him. "Take a tip from me, babe. See the boss. If he's a man, you'll get the tickets."

As she left the line, he pushed to the window. "I'll take those two tickets, bud."

"Do you have your marriage certificate?"

Coran reached through the window, snagged a coat lapel and had the man dragged half through the window in a flash. "Now I'll talk, punk, and you listen. Because I don't have a ring in my nose, don't get the idea I'm not married. Do I get those tickets, or do you give up mirrors for the next six weeks?"

The clerk looked at the gnarled fist under his nose and gave a wild nod of his head. "You get them."

The steel fingers relaxed and the clerk slid back inside his cage. "I'll report this," he stormed, shaking himself like a wet ani-

mal. "You'd better have your papers when you try to get past the purser." He handed out the tickets.

The girl followed Coran from the office. "I'll give you a thousand vikkals for those tickets."

Coran grinned savagely. "Not even if you said please."

"Please, and two thousand."

"Stop it—you're getting near my price. Besides, they wouldn't do you any good. You need a husband to go with 'em. Take the express rocket next month. It's a shorter orbit and you'll only lose two weeks."

"You take it then. My business won't wait. Three thousand."

Coran whistled. "What's your problem?"

"None of your business."

"Have it your own way. My business won't wait either. Now, if you don't mind, I'm in a hurry. I've less than two hours to find a honky-tonk and get myself a bride. I don't suppose you'd know where the nearest dive is. No, you wouldn't."

He turned away toward the elevators, but the girl clutched his arm desperately. "Six thousand . . . It's all I have."

Coran stared at her. "I'm sorry for you, but you'd have to kill me to get these away. And I'm hard to kill. I'll make a deal though. I'll sell you half of my double for three thousand. You'd have to marry me, though."

"Marry you!" There was a word of loathing in her tone.

"It's been done. I'm on my way out now to look up a floozy. I'll even marry her, if she's dope enough to want it that way. I don't like the idea any better than you do, but I'd hock grandma's false teeth to get to Venus. Forget I mentioned it. If I'm to be stuck with a dame for four months, it might as well be a flamethrower as an icicle."

He buzzed for the elevator before she called after him. "I—I've changed my mind." She was pale, with a look of suppressed fury about her. "I guess I'd do even that."

Coran laughed wickedly. "Don't flatter yourself. You're just a ticket to Venus to me. Meet me at the marriage bureau

in half an hour. We haven't much time, and you'll have to be psychographed. We really should know each other. I'm Steve Coran."

"I'm Gerda Mors. In half an hour."

THE purser stopped at a door marked No. 200. He was a young, inadequate-looking man.

"You won't have to carry me over the threshold," Gerda said crisply. She went inside and shut the door. In shocked silence, he re-checked the sheaf of papers in his hand.

"She's shy around strangers," Coran explained. "When do we take off?"

"In five minutes. We're making these emigrant runs under very crowded conditions. All passengers are expected to remain in their own staterooms most of the time. A certain amount of exercise is permitted, of course, once free flight is attained and the A-orbit corrections made. Until then, we recommend that everyone remain out of the crew's way. The safest place during acceleration is in bed."

Coran winked ponderously. "I'll make out all right. One thing, though. I believe I have a friend on board. Am I permitted to examine the passenger lists?"

"Of course, they're public property. See the captain. His office is up near the bow, just aft of the control rooms. But wait till we're out in space."

Coran knocked and entered the stateroom. Gerda was brushing her hair. She glanced up irritably. "This is my room," she told him shortly. "Find yourself another."

He laughed grimly. "The psychographs warned we were incompatible, but you'd better get used to me. It's 146 days to Venus, and we've only this stateroom between us. They practically lock us in, you know. We're going to be very good friends or most uncomfortable before we reach Venus."

Angry sparks shot from her violet eyes. "Did you know all this before?"

Coran nodded.

"You are a swine, aren't you? It won't do you any good. I'll tell the captain we're not married. I'll say it was all a fake, the

certificate was a forgery, that you're a . . ."

"Go ahead. I wish for your sake it would help, but they'd only check and find out it was genuine. Even if it weren't, you'd only be forced to go through the ceremony again. The rules are very specific to cover just such situations."

Fear and anger blended unpleasantly in her voice. "I'll think of something . . ."

Warning alarms blared through the ship. Ripples of soundless shock stirred the bulk.

"We're getting under way," Coran warned. "You'd better come to bed."

"I'd rather die," she said sullenly.

"Suit yourself. But it's pretty unpleasant."

THE rocket transport left its runway at an angle of 45 degrees, slanting up into the Sahara night with a blossom of pink-white flame flowering round its stern jets. A series of jarring vibrations smoothed to a muffled burr. The girl was flung heavily to the floor and lay there beside the porthole of fused quartz, retching feebly as the acceleration built up. Outside the port, what seemed the flank of a titanic mountain of moonlit sand fell rapidly astern. It tilted at an incredible angle.

Coran hunched himself off the bed and crawled to her. Gerda grimaced weakly and struck at him, then lapsed into unconsciousness. He picked her up and carried her to the bed, dumped her like a limp sack and clasped the straps about her. She did not rouse.

Her purse lay where she had dropped it. Coran went through it methodically. A small blaster gun of the type women thugs carry in their handbags. It appeared to have been used recently. Four Lumipencils. The usual cosmetics. A pillbox with a poison label. And, in an ivory frame, a small colorphoto miniature of the man whose face was on the Security Headquarters dossier card. Coran neutralized the charge in the blaster and set it on safety, then carefully replaced everything. He wished he had a pocket magnascope to study the miniature in detail, but that could wait. He must check the passenger lists and find out where Paul Jonian's room was located. Paul should be warned,

so that his surprise at seeing Coran would not give the show away.

The girl stirred and moaned feebly. Coran found the emergency medical locker and forced an anti-acceleration capsule between her tight-clenched teeth, following it with a water concentrate capsule. She would be wildly thirsty when she came out of it, and real water would have some unpleasant effects during A-shock. He leaned over and checked the straps. They were tight enough so she would never get out of that tie without help. Her eyes blinked open and she stared at him in panic.

"Just relax," he cautioned. "And don't get impatient. I'll be right back. Have to see a man about a . . ."

He went outside and made his way with difficulty up the bleak passage forward. The distorted gravity made walking extremely difficult. Once outside the main gravity field of Earth, artificial gravities would be turned on. Until then, only an experienced spaceman could get around safely. Coran was grateful for the rigorous training of the ISP.

A staccato bark of unintelligible verbal commands came through the half-opened doorway of the control room ahead. The captain's office should be somewhere about here. On Coran's right was a closed door marked CAPTAIN. Coran knocked twice without receiving any answer, then tried the door. It slid easily open. He stepped over the high threshold. Lights were flaring and dying away as if the generators were running unevenly. He peered about him, and at first the Spartan-like accommodations seemed unoccupied. He wondered if he should sit down and wait for the captain. A second look convinced him he would have a long wait.

Sprawled forward, half across the desk, was the captain's body. The upper part of his head had been blown away by a blaster gun, evidently fired at close quarters.

A cry behind him swung Coran around. In the frame of the opened doorway stood the purser, mouth open, pointing at the dead man with a trembling finger. Instinctively, Coran started for the door. The purser sprang into action, leaped on Coran

and caught him in a surprisingly strong grip for so slight a man. Coran made no attempt to struggle. In a moment the office was full of people. The burly first mate pulled the purser away from Coran.

"What is all this, Hamlin?" the mate demanded.

Coran had taken time to study the identification files on all the *Aphrodite's* officers at headquarters before coming aboard. He recognized the three officers instantly as Harriman, first mate—Hamlin, the purser—and Nelson, the navigator or astronaut—but was careful not to give himself away.

"I heard a sound in the captain's office, and when I came in to investigate, I found him," Hamlin explained. "The captain's been murdered."

Mate Harriman looked Coran up and down. "Where's the gun?" he asked.

"How should I know? I just came in a minute ago. He was like this when I got here."

Harriman drove a fist into Coran's mouth. "Come now, you don't expect us to believe a yarn like that. Where is that gun?"

Coran spat blood from his mangled lips. "I don't know anything about it. The purser can tell you why I wanted to see the captain."

Hamlin spoke up. "I told him to wait till we were out in space," he snapped. "He said he wanted to check the passenger list."

"I demand to see the first mate," Coran said.

The words seemed to recall Harriman to his duties. "I am the first mate," he said. "I haven't time to bother with you now. I'll take care of you later. Throw him in the cells till we get out in space. I'll have to take over for the Old Man."

CORAN was hustled roughly to the lower part of the ship and flung into the cramped quarters of the transport's brig. He settled back on the bunk and tried to straighten things out in his mind.

"At least I got a room to myself," he mused grimly. This was going to complicate things.

His wrist-chron had stopped, so he had no way of telling time, but they fed him

four times and he slept twice before they came for him. Two crew men waited in the passage while Hamlin came in and sat down.

"You're in a bad spot, Coran. It's customary in cases of civilian infractions of ship's rules to appoint an officer as counsel for their defense. I'm yours. Sorry you got pushed around, but you were lucky at that. Harriman's a pretty tough character. You'd have got worse if Nalson and I hadn't been there. He's been disciplined for brutality before now. They're giving you a hearing in the wardroom. I'd suggest you co-operate with me by telling me anything that will help with your case. I don't mind telling you your story's too weak to hold up. I'll do all I can for you, but you'll have to help."

"What am I supposed to do?" Coran grunted.

"You might tell me the truth. We know the captain must have been killed just as the ship took off. Otherwise, someone would have heard the shot. If you could prove you were somewhere else at the time—"

"I was with my wife. She'll bear witness for me."

"It won't do, Coran. I should have told you that your wife is ill and won't be able to testify. I found her myself, strapped to the bunk in your cabin, Martian plague! I called the doctor who examined her, then quarantined the cabin. We left concentrated food and water, warned her not to leave, then locked and sealed the cabin. No one can see her."

Coran went cold with anger. "Someone must really be trying to foul me up," he raged. "She couldn't have the plague—she's never been off the earth."

"Your papers read that you just came from Mars," objected Hamlin.

"I did. We were married just before the ship left. If I were carrying the plague, I'd have it myself. She couldn't have it—"

Hamlin laughed nervously. "I wish you could convince the doctor of that. He's been taking blood tests of me ever since we left her. I'm sorry for you, Coran, but she has it. I saw the grey rash myself. It's horrible, horrible . . ."

Coran's mind worked like lightning. She had said she would think of something. Something to keep the stateroom to herself. There might even be a more sinister motive than that. After that picture of the man he wanted in her purse, he could believe anything of her. Maybe she even knew about him. She was faking, but how? How, since she had been securely tied when he left her? Had he started his quest at the wrong end? She must have been the woman accomplice who had got a gun through the security police guarding the prisoner.

"What am I charged with?" he asked.

"Deliberate murder and plotting against the welfare of the ship. If the officers agree on your guilt, you can be put to death immediately. They put you through an airlock. The regulations have to be pretty stringent on a spaceship."

Coran stood up. "Let's go up and get it over with," he said. "We'll see about your regulations."

Manacled between the two brawny crewmen, a sullen Coran rode up in the elevators. Outside the wardroom, the group stopped while Hamlin knocked. "I wish you'd let me help you," he said in a final attempt.

Coran shook his head. "I know what I'm doing."

Hamlin shrugged. "I hope you do."

THE assembled officers stared at Coran curiously. His lip was still bruised and swollen. He stared insolently at the group and tried to thrust all other considerations out of his mind. The girl and his quest would have to wait. His immediate hurdle was to get out of this mess.

Harriman wet his lips and opened the hearing.

"I won't waste words when we all know why we're here. There is no need for formality in a hearing of this kind. The captain of the *Aphrodite* was foully murdered, and this man who calls himself Stephen Coran was found standing over his body. There was no gun in the room and none on the prisoner. Coran's papers seem to be in order. They show him to be a prospector from Mars, en route to Venus, but may be forgeries. That can be checked.

His wife is in quarantine, and will be unable to testify one way or the other."

Coran broke in. "I demand to hear the formal charge against me."

"As acting captain of the *Aphrodite*, I officially charge you, Stephen Coran, with the wilful murder of Captain Joseph Shalm, late master of this ship. Also, since the murder must have taken place at the exact moment of take-off, with the deliberate intent to delay and endanger the safety of the ship and all the lives on board."

"Good. Now I make formal demand that my wife be called as witness to the fact that I could not have been in the captain's office at the time of take-off."

"You heard me say, that your wife is in quarantine. She will not be able to testify. If you have anything else to say in your defense, speak up."

"I make no defense. Since the court is so obviously prejudiced, I will stand on my civilian rights as a technicality. This court has no jurisdiction over me. The most you can do is to confine me to the area of this ship until a charge can be brought against me in the admiralty court on Venus. Also, under Security Law No. F 1720, since the one witness I asked to have called in my defense has not been brought to court, I demand that the whole proceedings be dropped as illegal, unjustified, and prejudicial to civilian rights. Since I obviously cannot escape from the ship, you cannot even require the customary bond for reappearance."

Harriman's mouth dropped open. "Do you expect to get away with this?"

"More than that." Coran grimaced unpleasantly. "I wish to file charges with the nearest official of the ministry of transport that I was mishandled and held under restraint without formal charges being brought against me. If there is such an official on board, I demand to see him."

Nalson, the astronaut, hid a smile behind his sleeve, then leaned forward and whispered earnestly to Harriman. Harriman nodded, then turned to consult with the ship's doctor.

"Is this your doing, Hamlin?" the acting captain rasped sourly.

The purser shifted uneasily. "No, sir.

But, since the prisoner chooses this defense, I have no choice but to repeat his demands, officially. There is an official aboard, Paul Jomian of the transport ministry. I suggest you send for him and turn this hearing over to him. He will have whatever authority is necessary to deal with it."

In momentary desperation, Harriman glanced round the room at the circle of faces and saw that Coran had him over a barrel. The hard-faced navigator, Nalson, spoke up. "Better send for Jomian. In theory, we have the right of assessing the death penalty, but in practice, it's not so simple. The admiralty will review the case and, if your foot slips on some technicality, you might even have to face the disintegrators yourself."

Harriman gave in and sent for Jomian.

A RED BULB flashed and the buzzer sounded, then Paul Jomian stepped into the wardroom. He was a lean man, greying into his late fifties, with the bleakness of outer space in his eyes and a face badly scarred by spaceburns. His eyes stared as they fell upon the manacled figure of Coran standing in the center of the harsh-lit stage. Steve Coran stared back at him with insolently expressionless face.

The difficulty was rapidly explained by Captain Harriman in a monotonously leveled tone of repressed fury. Jomian studied the prisoner with politely casual interest while the harangue went on. When Harriman finished, the transport official considered briefly before giving his verdict.

"Well, gentlemen, much as I sympathize with your feelings in this matter, I'm afraid the prisoner is within his rights. Even if the circumstances are somewhat unusual, we have no choice but to release him. However, in view of the possible menace involved to the safety of the ship, I recommend that he be under constant surveillance by some competent and responsible officer, preferably the one appointed for his defense, who will see to it that he has no opportunity to perpetrate further violence. Once Venus is reached the man can be turned over to the proper authorities."

Coran broke in roughly. "Does all this monkey talk mean I'm free?"

Harriman was maliciously official. "I'm afraid it does. But don't try anything funny. Hamlin, Nalson, I'm detailing you two to watch over Coran in shifts. Don't let him out of your sight, day or night. If he attempts to steal a lifeboat and escape, or makes the slightest untoward move to hinder the operation of the ship or molest anyone on board, shoot him—that's all. Since he has no room, he will share yours for the remainder of the voyage."

Hamlin got a key and released Coran from his manacles.

Jomian glanced at him with an odd expression. "If you don't mind, Coran, I'd like a word with you in private. If the captain has no objection."

Harriman was curious, but nodded. "Are you sure you'll be safe with him?"

Jomian smiled. "That's my worry. Send your men to my cabin in an hour. After twelve years in the Space Patrol, I'm used to handling bad boys."

NINE days out the *Aphrodite* ran into trouble.

Proximity alarms blared wildly. It was only a small asteroid, not more than a quarter of a mile in diameter, just a jagged piece of rock and fused metal. But it came out of a direct line with the sun, moving fast, and discipline had been dangerously lax on the *Aphrodite* after Harriman took over command.

At 9:05 ship time, there came the sound of a rending crash up forward, followed by a nauseating sense of shock and withering waves of motion energy transformed into heat. Fortunately, the collision was a glancing one, but enough. The *Aphrodite* was a shattered wreck. Her bow and the control room were carried away bodily, and only the spacetight bulkheads of the waist saved the passengers and crew from instant death.

At 9:20, feeling far off course, leaking air dangerously from sprung seams, the doomed transport and the asteroid circled each other like wary wrestlers awaiting an opening. Sooner or later, as the initial force of the spin died down, they would crash together in flaming holocaust. In

the meantime, everything that could be done was being done.

Orders went out to abandon ship. Of the original complement of four hundred and eighty passengers and crew, nineteen were dead or missing, and eighty others more or less seriously injured. The heaviest casualties were among the rocket crew and officers, some of whom were fatally burned by premature atomic discharge. Rocket jets were set roaring at full capacity in a vain effort to break the wreck away from the deadly vicinity of the circling asteroid. Surviving crew members labored heroically to load and launch the lifeboats from three airlocks, two of which were so badly jammed as to be almost unworkable.

The forward compartments were a scene from inferno. Coran, who had been with Nalson in the chartroom when the crash occurred, picked himself out of the jumble of broken lockers and scattered metal-leaf charts and crawling through the glare and heat to a pitiable huddle of pulped flesh pinned beneath the wreckage of a beryllium table. Nalson's skull was fractured, blood pulsed from his ears, and he was gasping out his life as Coran pried the table off him. His eyes seemed bursting from his head.

"No excuse for wreck," he got out. "I'm . . . Security Police. Sent me in case you fumbled. Watch Harriman . . . Hamlin."

A spurt of blood from his mouth and nose stopped his words. The navigator spat savagely. "Think . . . Hamlin's . . . the man you want." His lips moved weakly, then hung open as he died.

USING a leg of the ruined table as a wrecking bar, Coran pried open the door and got into the passageway. A blast of sickening heat rushed to meet him. Forward was a lurid glare of white hot metal, and he could hear air shrieking through the leaks where seams had started. He fought his way aft to a bank of elevators, but they were hopelessly jammed.

Descending the spiral stairway, he encountered Paul Jomian.

"I thought you were gone," Jomian said. "The entire forward part of the ship seems to be carried away."

"It is. I'm hard to kill. Nalson's dead. And so are the men in the control room."

A kind of exhilaration moved in Coran. The endless waiting and watching, under constant surveillance, had gotten on his nerves. He was not used to intrigue. Now that a need for his kind of action had arisen, he felt better already.

Jomian's left arm had compound fractures above and below the elbow. It hung useless at his side, with splinters of bone thrusting through mangled skin and flesh. Coran broke open a locker and gave him emergency first aid, binding the limb with metal splints.

"That'll hold it till you can get it cared for. You'd better get to the lifeboats. I'm going to find my wife. As I told you, she may be in this racket, but I can't be sure. In any case, she's my responsibility."

"Can't I help?" Jomian asked.

"Not now. If I make it, we'll discuss it there. If not, you can take a message for me. There's an ISP squadron six hours behind us. Get a helioflash to them. Tell them to come a-running. I've an idea they'll find something interesting."

"I'll get word to them," Jomian promised. "Take care of yourself, boy."

The door of stateroom No. 200 was still locked and sealed. Coran opened a locker and got out a wrench to work off the lugs on the lock. A voice from behind jarred him.

"I've been looking for you," Hamlin sneered. "I thought you'd be up to something." In the dimming and flaring light, Coran got a glimpse of the blaster-gun in Hamlin's hand. Coran's fingers tightened on the wrench. He spun around and hurled the wrench in one motion. Hamlin pressed the trigger, but the wrench spoiled his aim. Coran dodged under the gun and dragged him down in a flying tackle. The gun went rattling down the corridor.

"Come away from there, you fool," Hamlin screamed as he broke away. "D'you want the plague?" He edged toward the gun, but Coran cut him off. Both lunged for it. Coran got it, but before he could use it, Hamlin kicked him in the stomach. He rolled on the floor in agony. Hamlin kicked again viciously. Coran fumbled with the gun.

A warning alarm sounded. The boats were about to leave.

Coran got his breath back. "Help me get her out. She has no more plague than you have. Besides, she's your——"

"You're mad," Hamlin shrieked. "They'd never let her into the boats. I won't risk the lives of innocent people on your sayso." He leaned across Coran to snatch at the gun. Coran clawed at his face and layers of plastic came off in his fingers. Hamlin screamed as the stuff came loose from his flesh. Then he turned and ran.

He darted up the companion stairs. By the time Coran could reach the gun, it was too late. The man had vanished to the upper deck.

Coran got to his knees and aimed the blaster at the jammed lock on the stateroom door. The mechanism and half the door disappeared in ravening violence. The shock knocked Coran flat.

Gerda stepped through the shattered doorway.

"What's going on?" she wailed hysterically. It was apparent that she had been crying, although she had tried to efface the marks.

"Never mind that. We've got to get you out of here. Are you all right?"

She laughed wildly. "Of course I am! Has everyone gone crazy? You look a fright. D'you want to carry me, or should I carry you?"

"Get to the lower decks. Find the doctor. Show him you're not sick. And hurry——the lifeboats are leaving." Coran made a vague gesture and slumped weakly against the wall while spirals of nausea raged through him. She was halfway to the companion stair before she noticed that he was not following. Coran had fainted.

COLD water splashing in his face revived him. His head was nestled in her lap.

"What are you doing here?" he raged. "If you don't hurry, it will be too late."

She answered with quiet assurance. "Listen, tough guy, you didn't have to come back for me. D'you think I'd leave you to save my skin after that?"

Coran shook his head to clear the mist

of dizzy weakness, and she helped him to his feet.

"Let's get going," he urged. "If the life-boats leave before we reach the airlock, you'll really be in a jam."

With the girl's arm tight around his waist to support him, he managed to make it to the Sally port. The airlock door was closed.

"The boats have gone," he said. He sat down hopelessly on a casket-like metal toolbox.

"Maybe someone will come," she said.

"That's what I'm afraid of," he snapped.

"In the meantime, I think we need some coffee . . . if I can find an unopened can."

Coran waved toward a locker where supplies were kept on clipshelves. She found a can with built-in heat unit and opened it, pouring coffee for them. He sipped his slowly, while she gulped down a scalding draft.

"You seem very calm about all this," Coran said grimly.

"Hysterics won't help. Besides, you seem to be expecting someone. What did you mean, that's what you're afraid of? Who would come back?"

"Don't you know?"

She shook her head in bewilderment. "How should I know? I'm a stranger here myself."

"You may as well stop playing innocent. In case you don't already know, I'm an officer in the space patrol. This wreck was deliberate, planned by some of the crew. There are two possibilities. Either they'll come back and try to salvage the plutonium cargo, or they have confederates waiting in space to close in as soon as the ship is abandoned. I don't look forward to either one."

"You act as if I knew something about all this," Gerda said irritably. "I don't know why you should think so, but you're way off the track. Why suspect me?"

"How can I help it, with that picture in your purse, and that phoney deal you pulled by playing sick?"

Gerda flushed, whether from anger or guilt Coran would have given much to know.

"I don't know how you know about that," she answered evenly. "I—I can't

explain about the picture, but the other I had nothing to do with. While you had me tied up, someone came into the room; naturally I thought it was you coming back. I was still dazed from shock and only half awake. First thing I knew, a man in uniform had jammed a pillow over my face. I thought he was trying to kill me, and nearly smothered. He rubbed something on my elbows and down the cords of my neck, then left. It seemed like a nightmare. I blamed you vaguely till I remembered the gold braid on his sleeves and knew it must have been a ship's officer. Later, an officer came in with the doctor, who took one look at me and seemed scared to death. Too scared to examine me. They wouldn't listen to anything, just untied me enough so I could work loose eventually, left some stuff, and locked me in. That's all I knew till you let me out just now.

CORAN considered. "It sounds plausible. I'd like to believe you, but that photograph is too damning. You'll have a lot of explaining to do . . . if we get out of this alive."

"What about the photograph? What's he wanted for?"

"There's another one of him in the Security Police headquarters. He's the man I was sent to get. Both ISP and the Security Police want him. The original charge was barratry, but—"

"What's barratry?" she asked.

"It's the deliberate wrecking of a ship, for the insurance or to salvage the cargo illegally. I don't know what your connection is with this man, but—"

"It's very simple," she said. "He's my brother. I knew he was in trouble, but didn't know it was so serious. Our family broke up years ago. Mother married again. That was fifteen years ago. I was ten, and Ken was thirteen. We took our stepfather's name, but Ken and he never got along very well. Ken ran away to Venus when he was seventeen. Mother died a year ago. I—I wanted to find Ken and help him. My stepfather had him traced for me and we found out he was in trouble with the police. I thought if I could talk to him, maybe he'd give himself

up, take his just punishment, and we could start over again together. Ken's all I have left. He's not bad. A little wild, but not bad."

Coran stood up and stared into the black gulf of space through the visiplat. He felt a sudden bleak distaste for his profession.

"I'm afraid it's a little late for that," he said gently. "He's wanted for barratry, murder, and perhaps treason. The penalty for any one of them is death. I'm sorry."

Gerda sat silently, brooding over the information. "You think I'm going to cry, don't you? And you hate emotional women. You can relax. I think I've known all along that it was hopeless. It does hurt, but I'm beyond crying any more."

FAR out in the void a clustered blur of faint, needle-sharp lights etched itself against the star-patterned darkness. Space-ships, coming up fast under rocket power. Coran glanced quickly at the wall-chron. It was too soon for the space patrol. Even under full acceleration, they could not make it in less than three hours.

"I'll have to trust you," he said grimly. "Brace yourself—company's coming."

Gerda snapped out of her black reverie.

"What are you going to do?"

"We'd better work out a plan of action."

Working like mad, Coran dumped the contents of the metal toolbox onto the floor. With a wrench, he smashed the hand-operated controls which worked the airlock from the interior of the ship into a tangle of twisted machinery. Then he scooped up the rest of the tools and threw them down a waste disposal chute.

"Get inside the toolbox," he ordered.

"Try it once to make sure you can raise the lid from inside. Then keep out of sight. When they get here, I'll try to draw them away into the after part of the ship. If I succeed in drawing them off, you slip out and get into the airlock. Close the door and lock it from inside. If I manage to circle around and get back here, I'll signal you with three soft taps on the door, followed by three hard ones. Don't open for anyone else. It'll take them over an hour to cut through that door from in here. You'll have a gambler's chance."

"Good luck," said Gerda softly. She

climbed into the toolbox while Coran recharged the blaster gun and stuffed his pockets with extra ammunition.

Gerda raised the box lid slightly. "It works, Steve," she said. "Take care of yourself."

He grinned. "One thing more. When you're into the airlock, get into a space-suit and get one ready for me. They're on racks at the left side, inside a locker."

She nodded. The lid slammed down.

Coran re-arranged the stowage of boxes in the next compartment into a series of defensive barricades, then crouched beside the half-opened door of the sally-port. He had not long to wait.

The airlock door swung open and three rough-looking men in space suits came cautiously through. They were followed by a dozen others not wearing the heavily-insulated space armor. The pirates must have run a gangway tube between the ships and fastened it with magnetic grapnels. The outer doors of the airlock would open automatically as the pressure equalized. He wondered if Gerda would have sense enough to close and bolt the outers as well as the inward doors. It was too late to worry about that now.

Coran took careful aim and fired his blaster beam into the crowd of men. Four were killed by the first discharge. The others broke for cover. Blaster beams interlaced, and the room jarred with repeated concussion. Men poured through the opened airlock door. The temperature rose sharply with the release of energy. The pirates rushed the door and Coran was forced to fall back to his line of barricades.

He retreated cautiously, firing as he went. From behind the last of his barricades, he burned down three of his foes, then broke and ran for the engine room shaft, leaping across it to the spiralled stair. Just as he reached the upper loft of engines a beam cut down the shaft. He dodged behind a massive generator, but three blaster beams concentrated on it. The force of their tripled discharge tore it from its moorings. Artificial gravity combined with its mass to send it crashing into a tangle of the intricate machinery below.

To avoid being crushed, Coran was

forced to plunge down the second shaft. He lost himself in the spiderweb of inner support beams. The pirates scattered and climbed into the maze of beams, probing with their blaster rays as shadows moved uneasily in the eery darkness. The lumibulbs waxed and waned as the unsteady current fluctuated.

FURTHER and further Coran led them, always away from the sally-port and the airlock, darting chance beams at his pursuers whenever opportunity presented. He had the advantage of knowing that they were all enemies. Their forces were divided and confused. In the weird and uncomfortable lofts of the engine-room, clear targets were impossible.

A wild half-plan occurred to Coran. He headed in the direction of the main engine-room switch box and with his beam burned out all the fuses.

Pit-like darkness enveloped the lofts as the lumibulbs went out. It was touch and go sliding down the long beams in the pall of utter blackness. He reached a catwalk, and cautiously made his way toward the elevators. Once he collided with a heavy body and a man swore savagely.

He missed the elevators, but by some miracle found a hatchway leading to the cargo holds. Sliding through, he cut down the intensity of his blaster beam and melted the plastic and metal hatchcover into a fused mass. That should delay them a few minutes. He scuttled down a deserted passageway and began climbing flights of stairs. If he could only find his way back to the sally-port from this other direction. He came suddenly into the room of his hasty barricades next to the sally-port. It was occupied.

Two men had been left behind as guards. He caught them unawares, and burned both down with one sweep of his beam.

The sally-port was empty. The box lid lay on the floor and the airlock door was closed tight.

With the butt of his blaster, he tapped out the signal on the airlock door.

There was a smooth hiss of releasing metal parts and the airlock door came open. He slipped through and slammed the door, spinning the lockbolts tight.

"Thank heavens, you made it," Gerda said. Pale and shaken, she handed him the heavy space-armor. "I was afraid you'd run into those others in the next room. They almost caught me. I had the lid half-raised when they came into the sally-port to check."

"Put on your helmet," he ordered roughly, as she handed him the fishbowl-like contrivance.

She laughed. "The air's bad in here. I could hardly breathe, and I didn't know how to work the valves in the helmet."

Coran swore briefly, then adjusted her helmet and put on his own. He set the microphones and the space communicators.

"I shut the outside door," she complained. "I even bolted it, but it won't stay locked."

"It's automatic," he told her. "When the air pressure's equal on both sides, it opens. I'll show you."

Just as he reached for the controls, the door came open with a violent crash. Hamlin stood framed in the doorway, blaster gun in hand.

"I hadn't counted on you, Coran," he said. The gun did not waver. "Don't reach for that gun."

CORAN relaxed and stared at his opponent. "You look quite different without the plastic mask," he observed. Hamlin was older than he had looked in the photographs, but noticeably the same man, despite lines of strain which did not show in either picture.

Hamlin smiled wolfishly. "My pictures don't flatter me, do they? The problem is what you've done with my men. You are becoming a nuisance, Coran. I'll have to kill you, of course, but I'd like to know how you managed this switch."

Coran was playing for time. "I'll make a deal with you," he said. "I'm curious to know why you pulled that Martian plague stunt with Gerda."

Hamlin laughed. "I recognized her at once, even though she had changed since I last saw her. Ten years is a long time when you're kids, but I'd seen a picture of her since then. When I saw you with her, I knew you were up to something. I wanted to keep you away from her till I

could deal with you. The rest was easy, just a little grease and aluminum powder. The doctor was scared to death . . ."

Gerda was staring at her brother through the space helmets. "You did know me, Ken?"

Hamlin shot her a contemptuous glance. "You little fool," he snapped. "You should never have come here. I don't know what I'm going to do with you."

Gerda cringed as if he had struck her. "We'll have plenty of time for old home week later," Hamlin went on. "Now tell me what's happened to my men, Coran. I haven't much time to waste on you."

Coran bit his lip. "I just lured them into the engine room and tangled them up in the lofts, then blew out the lights. It was a good trick while it worked. Some of them got weeded out on the way."

"Now it's your turn, Coran," Hamlin said brutally. His finger tightened on the trigger. Gerda stood looking from one to the other with a look of anguish on her face. "Don't do it, Ken," she said, moving in front of Coran.

"Stay out of this, Gerda," Coran warned.

"I'm not kidding," Hamlin said, "if you get in my way, I'll kill both of you"

Coran struck her helmet so heavily she fell against the wall. In the same movement, he lunged at Hamlin. The blaster beam raked the ceiling, and in that confined space concussion was unbearable, even inside the space suits. Coran's blow knocked Hamlin through the doorway into the connecting tube. Coran swung about and caught up his gun.

"Don't shoot, Steve," Gerda wailed.

The shock of the first blaster discharge had loosened the magnetic grappels which held the ships together. The pirate's craft began to drift away, tearing loose the end of the tube.

Hamlin was on his feet, trying to fire his blaster, but the charge was burned out. It only flickered feebly. He leaped the widening distance between the ships and went up the side like a spider, gripping the shell of the *Erania* with the magnetic soles of his space-boots. Coran climbed round the doorway and went up after him, gun in hand.

Hamlin had disappeared round the curve of the hull. It was rough, dangerous work climbing round the outer shell of a spaceship. One slip meant a plunge into the awesome emptiness of the void. Gravity was practically non-existent, but the grip of the soles was slight, and only one foot could be moved at a time.

From the vantage point of his cover behind a dead rocket tube, Hamlin waited. He knew that his time was short. Off across the black gulf of space three flakes of gleaming light resolved themselves into fast patrol cruisers, racing toward the derelict *Erania*. Coran had not seen them, but came on steadily, determined to see his assignment through. Hamlin waited, gun resting on the rocket tube, hoping for a clear shot. Mad with hatred, he blamed Coran for the failure of his whole life, and was viciously resolved to take his enemy with him.

The patrol ships moved in close and warped alongside the *Aphrodite*. Men in space suits poured out of the access hatch and guns were trained on the rocket tube behind which Hamlin held out.

Sick fury possessed Hamlin. With the gesture of a trapped rat, he rammed his blaster gun up the vents of the rocket tube. If he could ignite the remaining fuel, they would all blow to Kingdom Come in a roaring atomic holocaust.

Coran saw his intent and stood up to fire. His beam went wildly into the darkness as he lost his balance and toppled into space. Another beam whipped out from the patrol cruiser and caught Hamlin full force as he stood up to fire into the tube.

He vanished in a glittering cloud of particles, dispersed instantly by their own radiation.

Lines with magnetic grappels looped out and snatched Coran reeling him back to the patrol ship like a grotesque fish. For three days, he lay unconscious from space-shock . . .

BACK on the Moon, at Luna Station, three people were waiting for the Martian Express to take off.

"You see, Steve, Gerda's really my daughter," Paul Jomian explained. "Her mother divorced me fifteen years ago, and

a year later married Gartan Mors. She took the children, of course, and Mors raised them as his own. Gerda was young enough to conform but Ken was always wild. He took it for three or four years, then ran away to Venus. Gerda always idolized him, but really she scarcely knew him. If anyone's at fault in all this, I am the one to blame. I was a stubborn fool, and Nell could never stand my job."

Gerda offered her hand to Coran. "I hate long goodbyes," she said. "I'm sorry about everything. I—I don't really blame you for Ken's death. Goodbye, and good luck."

Steve decided it was safe to play out a fond and corny farewell. He took her hand lingeringly. "Don't worry about things, Gerda. I know how you feel. It wouldn't have worked out anyhow. Just let me know when you get the divorce. Let's break this up. I thought that I hated Mars-station, but now that I'm through with the Space Patrol, I can't wait to get back."

Paul Jomian put his arm around his daughter as they watched Coran turn and wave before climbing aboard the express cruiser. On Coran's face was the smug complacency of a man who has neatly avoided being stuck with a dame. He grinned and vanished up the gangplank. Jomian muttered something inaudibly.

"You're a sucker to let a man like Steve get away . . . for any reason," he told her. "Such men are hard to find, and still harder to hook once you've found them."

"I know it," she said firmly, though tears brimmed in her eyes. "But I just couldn't love the man who'd killed my brother. I couldn't."

"That's the biggest mistake you ever made. Steve didn't want me to tell you, but he didn't shoot Ken. His beam went wild." Jomian nerved himself for an ordeal. "I killed him."

"Why didn't you tell me—*why?*" she wailed.

"I should have told you before, but I couldn't. I didn't want you to hate me, now that I'd just found you."

Gerda clung to her father fiercely. "I couldn't hate you, dad. But we musn't let him go. I might have a chance to win him, but how can I if he's on Mars and I'm here?"

"I'm afraid that's out of our hands. Steve doesn't know it, but he's not through with the space patrol. They refused his resignation. He's just been appointed commander of the Mars-Jupiter sector. Do you think you have the guts to be a space-man's wife?"

"I *know* I have. But how'll I ever convince Steve? You heard him. He said it wouldn't ever work out."

"That's your problem. He's a stubborn man."

Sudden determination shone in her face. "And I'm a stubborn woman," she called back, blowing her father a kiss. She reached the gangplank just in time to grab it and be dragged up with it.

Jomian grinned. "She's my kid. I'll bet she trims his wings, the rat."

ATTENTION . . . PLANET FANS! OLD FRIENDS . . . AND NEW!

WHAT do you think of the VIZIGRAPH? It's our regular readers' own section, where we've been printing the best of your letters, the bitter with the sweet. We think it's been worthwhile, but every so often we get complaints about it. Some readers would rather have an extra story in the space taken up by the VIZIGRAPH. Why don't you grab a penny postcard and let us know what you think? Do you want the VIZIGRAPH? Or do you want more of the swell stories jamming our files? Just a postcard—but let us know!

THE STARBUSTERS

By ALFRED COPPEL, JR.

A bunch of kids in bright new uniforms, transiting the constellations in a disreputable old bucket of a space-ship—why should the leathery-tentacled, chlorine-breathing Eridans take them seriously?

HQ TELWING CSN 30 JAN 27 TO CMDR DAVID FARRAGUT STRYKALSKI VII CO TRS CLEOPATRA FLEET BASE CANALOPOLIS MARS STOP SUBJECT ORDERS STOP ROUTE LUNA PHOBOS SYRTIS MAJOR TRANSENDERS PRIORITY AAA STOP MESSAGE FOLLOWS STOP TRS CLEOPATRA AND ALL ATTACHED AND OR ASSIGNED PERSONNEL HEREBY RELIEVED ASSIGNMENT AND DUTY INNER PLANET PATROL GROUP STOP ASSIGNED TEMP DUTY BUREAU RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT STOP SUBJECT VESSEL WILL PROCEED WITHOUT DELAY FLEET EXPERIMENTAL SUBSTATION PROVING GROUNDS TETHYS SATURNIAN GROUP STOP CO WILL REPORT UPON ARRIVAL TO CAPT IVY HENDRICKS ENGINEERING OFFICER PROJECT WARP STOP SIGNED H. GORMAN SPACE ADMIRAL COMMANDING STOP END MESSAGE END MESSAGE END MESSAGE.

"Amen! Amen! Amen! Stop." Commander Strykalski smoothed out the wrinkled flimsy by spreading it carefully on the wet bar.

Coburn Whitley, the T.R. *Cleopatra's* Executive, set down his Martini and leaned over very slowly to give the paper a microscopic examination in the mellow light.

"Maybe," he began hopefully, "It could be a forgery?"

Strike shook his head.

Lieutenant Whitley looked crestfallen. "Then perhaps old Brass-bottom Gorman means some other guy named Strykalski?"

To Cob, eight Martinis made anything possible.

"Could there be two Strykalskis?" demanded the owner of the name under discussion.

"No." Whitley sighed unhappily. "And there's only one Tellurian Rocket Ship *Cleopatra* in the Combined Solarian Navies, bless her little iron rump! Gorman means us. And I think we've been had, that's what I think!"

"Tethys isn't so bad," protested Strike.

Cob raised a hand to his eyes as though to blot out the sight of that distant moonlet. "Not so bad, he says! All you care about is seeing Ivy Hendricks again, I know you! Tethys!"

Strike made a passing effort to look stern and failed. "You mean *Captain* Hendricks, don't you, Mister Whitley? Captain Hendricks of Project Warp?"

Cob made a sour face. "Project Warp, yet! Sounds like a dog barking!" He growled deep in his throat and barked once or twice experimentally. The officer's club was silent, and a silver-braided Commodore sitting nearby scowled at Whitley. The Lieutenant subsided with a final small, "Warp!"

An imported Venusian quartet began to play softly. Strike ordered another round of drinks from the red-skinned Martian tending bar and turned on his stool to survey the small dance floor. The music and the subdued lights made him think of Ivy Hendricks. He really wanted to see her again. It had been a long time since that memorable flight when they had worked together to pull Admiral Gorman's flagship Atropos out of a tight spot on a perihelion run. Ivy was good to work with . . . good to be around.

But there was apparently more to this transfer than just Ivy pulling wires to



see him again. Things were tense in the System since Probe Fleet sketeerboats had discovered a race of group-minded, non-human intelligences on the planets of 40 Eridani C. They lived in frozen worlds that were untenable for humans. And they were apparently all parts of a single entity that never left the home globe . . . a thing no human had seen. The group mind. They were rabidly isolationist and they had refused any commerce with the Solar Combine.

Only CSN Intelligence knew that the Eridans were warlike . . . and that they were strongly suspected of having interstellar flight . . .

So, reflected Strike, the transfer of the *Cleopatra* to Tethys for work under the Bureau of Research and Development meant innovations and tests. And Commander Strykowski was concerned. The beloved Old Aphrodisiac didn't take kindly to innovations. At least she never had before, and Strike could see no reason to suppose the cantankerous monitor would have changed her disposition.

"There's Celia!" Cob Whitley was waving toward the dance floor.

Celia Graham, trim in her Ensign's greys, was making her way through the crowd of dancers. Celia was the *Cleopatra's* Radar Officer, and like all the rest, bound with chains of affection to the cranky old warship. The *Cleopatra's* crew was a unit . . . a team in the true sense of the word. They served in her because they wanted to . . . would serve in no other. That's the way Strike ran his crew, and that's the way the crew ran Lover-Girl. Old Aphrodisiac's family was a select community.

There was a handsome Martian Naval Lieutenant with Celia, but when she saw the thoughtful expression on her Captain's face, she dismissed him peremptorily. Here was something, apparently, of a family matter.

"Well, I can't see anything to worry about, Skipper," she said when he had explained. "I should think you'd be glad of a chance to see Ivy again."

Cob Whitley leaned precariously forward on his bar-stool to wag a finger under Celia's pretty nose. "But he doesn't

know what Captain Hendricks has cooked up for Lover-Girl, and you know the old carp likes to be treated with respect." He affected a very knowing expression. "Besides, we shouldn't be gallivanting around testing Ivy's electronic eyelash-curlers when the Eridans are likely to be swooshing around old Sol any day!"

"Cob, you're drunk!" snapped Celia.

"I am at that," mused Whitley with a foolish grin. "And I'd better enjoy it. There'll be no Martinis on Tethys, that's for sure! This cruise is going to interfere with my research on ancient twentieth century potables . . ."

Strike heaved his lanky frame upright. "Well, I suppose we'd better call the crew in." He turned to Cob. "Who is Officer of the Deck tonight?"

"Bayne."

"Celia, you'd better go relieve him. He'll have to work all night to get us an orbit plotted."

"Will do, Skipper," Celia Graham left.

"Cob, you'd better turn in. Get some sleep. But have the NPs round up the crew. If any of them are in the brig, let me know. I'll be on the bridge."

"What time do you want to lift ship?"

"0900 hours."

"Right." Cob took a last loving look around the comfortable officer's club and heaved a heavy sigh. "Tethys, here comes Lover-Girl. It's going to be a long, long cruise, Captain."

How long, he couldn't have known . . . then.

THE flight out was uneventful. Un-
eventful, that is for the T.R.S. *Cleopatra*. Only one tube-liner burned through, and only six hours wasted in nauseous free-fall.

Lover-Girl wormed her way through the asteroid belt, passed within a million miles of Jupiter and settled comfortably down on the airless field next to the glass-steel dome of the Experimental Substation on Tethys. But her satisfied repose was interrupted almost before it was begun. Swarms of techmen seemed to burst from the dome and take her over. Welders and physicists, naval architects and shipfitters, all armed with voluminous blueprints and

atomic torches set to work on her even before her tubes had cooled. Power lines were crossed and re-crossed shunted and spliced. Weird screen-like appendages were welded to her bow and stern.

Workmen and engineers stomped through her companionways, bawling incomprehensible orders. And her crew watched in mute dismay. They had nothing to say about it . . .

IVY HENDRICKS rose from her desk as Strike came into her Engineering Office. There was a smile on her face as she extended her hand.

"It's good to see you again, Strike."

Strykalski studied her. Yes, she hadn't changed. She was still the Ivy Hendricks he remembered. She was still calm, still lovely, and still very, very competent.

"I've missed you, Ivy." Strike wasn't just being polite, either. Then he grinned. "Lover-Girl's missed you, too. There never has been an Engineering Officer that could get the performance out of her cranky hulk the way you used to!"

"It's a good thing," returned Ivy, still smiling, "that I'll be back at my old job for a while, then."

Strykalski raised his eyebrows inquisitively. Before Ivy could explain, Cob and Celia Graham burst noisily into the room and the greetings began again. Ivy, as a former member of the *Cleopatra's* crew, was one of the family.

"Now, what I would like to know," Cob demanded when the small talk had been disposed of, "is what's with this 'Project Warp'? What are you planning for Lover-Girl? Your techmen are tearing into her like she was a twenty-day leave!"

"And why was the *Cleopatra* chosen?" added Celia curiously.

"Well, I'll make it short," Ivy said. "We're going to make a hyper-ship out of her."

"Hyper-ship?" Cob was perplexed.

Ivy Hendricks nodded. "We've stumbled on a laboratory effect that warps space. We plan to reproduce it in portable form on the *Cleopatra* . . . king size. She'll be able to take us through the hyper-spatial barrier."

"Golly!" Celia Graham was wide-eyed. "I always thought of hyperspace as a . . . well, sort of an abstraction."

"That's been the view up to now. We all shared it here, too, until we set up this screen system and things began to disappear when they got into the warped field. Then we rigged a remote control and set up telecameras in the warp . . ." Ivy's face sobered. "We got plates of star-fields . . . star-fields that were utterly different and . . . and *alien*. It seems that there's at least one other space interlocked and co-existent with ours. When we realized that we decided to send a ship through. I sent a UV teletype to Admiral Gorman at Luna Base . . . and here you are."

"Why us?" Cob asked thoughtfully.

"I'll answer that," offered Strike, "Lover-Girl's a surge circuit monitor, and it's a safe bet this operation takes plenty of power." He looked over to Ivy. "Am I right?"

"Right on the nose, Strike," she returned. Then she broke into a wide smile. "Besides, I wouldn't want to enter an alien cosmos with anyone but Lover-Girl's family. It wouldn't be right."

"Golly!" said Celia Graham again. "Alien cosmos . . . it sounds so creepy when you say it that way."

"You could call it other things, if you should happen to prefer them," Ivy Hendricks said, "Subspace . . . another plane of existence. I . . ."

She never finished her sentence. The door burst open and a Communications yeoman came breathlessly into the office. From the ante-room came the sound of a Ultra Wave teletype clattering imperiously . . . almost frantically.

"Captain Hendricks!" cried the man excitedly, "A message is coming through from the Proxima transsender . . . they're under attack!"

Strykalski was on his feet. "Attack!"

"The nonhumans from Eridanus have launched a major invasion of the solar Combine! All the colonies in Centaurus are being invaded!"

Strike felt the bottom dropping out of his stomach, and he knew that all the others felt the same. If this was a war, they

were the ones who would have to fight it. And the Eridans! Awful leathery creatures with tentacles . . . chlorine breathers! They would make a formidable enemy, welded as they were into one fighting unit by the functioning of the group mind . . .

He heard himself saying sharply into Ivy's communicator: "See to it that my ship is fueled and armed for space within three hours!"

"Hold on, Strike!" Ivy Hendricks intervened, "What about the tests?"

"I'm temporarily under Research and Development command, Ivy, but Regulations say that fighting ships cannot be held inactive during wartime! The *Cleopatra's* a warship and there's a war on now. If you can have your gear jerry-rigged in three hours, you can come along and test it when we have the chance. Otherwise the hell with it!" Strykowski's face was dead set. "I mean it, Ivy."

"All right, Strike. I'll be ready," Ivy Hendricks said coolly.

EXACTLY three hours and five minutes later, the newly created hyper-ship that was still Old Aphrodisiac lifted from the ramp outside the Substation dome. She rose slowly at first, the radioactive flame from her tubes splashing with sun-bright coruscations over the loading pits and revetments. For a fleeting instant she was outlined against the swollen orb of Saturn that filled a quarter of Tethys' sky, and then she was gone into the galactic night.

Aboard, all hands stood at GQ. On the flying bridge Strykowski and Coburn Whitley worked steadily to set the ship into the proper position in response to the steady flood of equations that streamed into their station from Bayne in the dorsal astrogation blister.

An hour after blasting free of Tethys was pointed at the snaking river of stars below Orion that formed the constellation of Eridanus.

When Cob asked why, Strike replied that knowing Gorman, they could expect orders from Luna Base ordering them either to attack or reconnoiter the 40 Eridani C system of five planets. Strykowski added rather dryly that it was likely

to be the former, since Space Admiral Gorman had no great affection for either the Aphrodite or her crew.

Ivy Hendricks joined them after stowing her gear, and when Whitley asked her opinion, she agreed with Strike. Her experiences with Gorman had been as unfortunate as any of the others.

"I was afraid you'd say that," grumbled Cob, "I was just hoping you wouldn't."

The interphone flashed. Strike flipped the switch.

"Bridge."

"Communications here. Message from Luna Base, Captain."

"Here it is," Strykowski told Cob. "Right on time."

"Speak of the devil," muttered the Executive.

"From the Admiral, sir," the voice in the interphone said, "Shall I read it?"

"Just give me the dope," ordered Strike.

"The Admiral orders us to quote make a diversionary attack on the planet of 40 Eridani C II unquote," said the squawk-box flatly.

"Acknowledge," ordered Strykowski.

"Wilco. Communications out."

Strike made an I-told-you-so gesture to his Executive. Then he turned toward the enlisted man at the helm. "Quartermaster?"

The man looked up from his auto-pilot check. "Sir."

"Steady as she goes."

"Yes, sir."

"And that," shrugged Ivy Hendricks, "Is that."

THREE weeks passed in the timeless limbo of second order flight. Blast tubes silent, the *Cleopatra* rode the curvature of space toward Eridanus. At eight and a half light years from Sol, the second-order was cut so that Bayne could get a star sight. As the lights of the celestial globe slowly retreated from their unnatural grouping ahead and astern, brilliant Sirius and its dwarf companion showed definite disks in the starboard ports. At a distance of 90,000,000 miles from the Dog Star, its fourteen heavy-gravity planets were plainly visible through the electron telescope.

Strykalski and Ivy Hendricks stood beside Bayne in the dorsal blister while the astrogator sighted Altair through his polychrom. His long, horse face bore a look of complete self-approbation when he had completed his last shot.

"A perfect check with the plotted course! How's that for fancy dead reckoning?" he exclaimed.

He was destined never to know the accolade, for at that moment the communicator began to flash angrily over the chart table. Bayne cut it in with an expression of disgust.

"Is the Captain there?" demanded Celia Graham's voice excitedly.

Strike took over the squawk-box. "Right here, Celia. What is it?"

"Radar contact, sir! The screen is crazy with blips!"

"Could it be window?"

"No, sir. The density index indicates spacecraft. High value in the chlorine lines . . ."

"Eridans!" cried Ivy.

"What's the range, Celia?" demanded Strike. "And how many of them are there?"

The sound of the calculator came through the grill. Then Celia replied: "Range 170,000 miles, and there are more than fifty and less than two hundred. That's the best I can do from this far away. They seem to have some sort of radiation net out and they are moving into spread formation."

Strike cursed. "They've spotted us and they want to scoop us in with that force net! Damn that group mind of theirs . . . it makes for uncanny co-ordination!" He turned back to the communicator. "Cob! Are you on?"

"Right here, Captain," came Cob Whitely's voice from the bridge.

"Shift into second-order! We'll have to try and run their net!"

"Yes, sir," Whitely snapped.

"Communications!" called Strike.

"Communications here."

"Notify Luna Base we have made contact. Give their numbers, course, and speed!"

Ivy could feel her heart pounding under

her blouse. Her face was deadly pale, mouth pinched and drawn. This was the first time in battle for any of them . . . and she dug her fingernails into her palms trying not to be afraid.

Strykalski was rapping out his orders with machine-gun rapidity, making ready to fight his ship if need be . . . and against lop-sided odds. But years of training were guiding him now.

"Gun deck!"

A feminine voice replied.

"Check your accumulators. We may have to fight. Have the gun-pointers get the plots from Radar. And load fish into all tubes."

"Yes, sir!" the woman rapped out.

"Radar!"

"Right here, Skipper!"

"We're going into second order, Celia. Use UV Radar and keep tabs on them."

"Yes, Captain."

Strike turned to Ivy Hendricks. "Let's get back to the bridge, Ivy. It's going to be a hell of a rough half hour!"

As they turned to go, all the pin-points of light that were the stars vanished, only to reappear in distorted groups ahead and behind the ship. They were in second order flight again, and traveling above light speed. Within seconds, contact would be made with the advance units of the alien fleet.

Old Aphrodisiac readied herself for war.

LIKE a maddened bull terrier, the old monitor charged at the Eridan horde. Within the black hulls strange, tentacled creatures watched her in scanners that were activated by infrared light. The chlorine atmosphere grew tense as the Tellurian warship drove full at the pulsating net of interlocked force lines. Parsecs away, on a frozen world were a dull red shrunken sun shone dimly through fetid air, the thing that was the group mind of the Eridans guided the thousand leathery tentacles that controlled the hundred and fifty black spaceships. The soft quivering bulk of it throbbed with excitement as it prepared to kill the tiny Tellurian thing that dared to threaten its right to conquest.

Old Lover-Girl tried gallantly to pierce

the strange trap. She failed. The alien weapons were too strange, too different from anything her builders could have imagined or prepared her to face. The net sucked the life from her second-order generators, and she slowed, like the victim of a nightmare. Now rays of heat reached out for her, grazing her flanks as she turned and twisted. One touched her atmospheric fins and melted them into slowly congealing globes of steel glowing with a white heat. She fought back with whorls of atomic fire that sped from her rifles to wreak havoc among her attackers.

Being non-entities in themselves, and only limbs of the single mentality that rested secure on its home world, the Eridans lacked the vicious will to live that drove the Tellurian warship and her crew. But their numbers wore her down, cutting her strength with each blow that chanced to connect.

Torpedoes from the tubes that circled her beam found marks out in space and leathery aliens died, their black ships burst asunder by the violence of new atoms being created from old.

But there were too many. They hemmed her in, heat rays ever slashing, wounding her. Strykalski fought her controls, cursing her, coaxing her. Damage reports were flowing into the flying bridge from every point in the monitor's body. Lover-Girl was being hurt . . . hurt badly. The second order drive was damaged, not beyond repair, but out of commission for at least six hours. And they couldn't last six hours. They couldn't last another ten minutes. It was only the practiced hands of her Captain and crew that kept the *Cleopatra* alive . . .

"We're caught, Ivy!" Strike shouted to the girl over the noises of battle. "She can't stand much more of this!"

Cob was screaming at the gun-pointers through the open communicator circuit, his blood heated by the turbulent cacophony of crackling rays and exploding torpedoes. "Hit 'em! Damn it! Damn it, hit 'em now! Dead ahead! Hit 'em again! . . ."

Ivy stumbled across the throbbing deck to stand at Strykalski's side. "The hyper drive!" she yelled, "The hyper drive!"

It was a chance. It was the *only* chance . . . for Lover-Girl and Ivy and Cob and Celia . . . for all of them. He had to chance it. "Ivy!" he called over his shoulder, "Check with Engineering! See if the thing's hooked into the surge circuit!"

She struggled out of the flying bridge and down the ramp toward the engine deck. Strike and Cob stayed and sweated and cursed and fought. It seemed that she would never report.

At last the communicator began to flash red. Strike opened the circuit with his free hand. "All right?" he demanded with his heart in his throat.

"Try it!" Ivy shouted back.

Strykalski lurched from his chair as another ray caught the ship for an instant and heated a spot on the wall to a cherry red. Gods! he prayed fervently. Let it work!

A movement of the ship threw him to the deck. He struggled to his feet and across to the jerry-rigged switchboard that controlled the hyper drive's warp field. With a prayer on his lips, he slapped at the switches with wild abandon . . .

THE sudden silence was like a physical blow. Strike staggered to the port and looked out. No alien ships filled the void with crisscrossing rays. No torpedoes flashed. The *Cleopatra* was alone, floating in star-flecked emptiness.

There were no familiar constellations. The stars were spread evenly across the ebony bowl of the sky, and they looked back at him with an alien, icy disdain.

The realization that he stood with a tiny shell, an infinitesimal human island lost in the vastness of a completely foreign cosmos broke with an almost mind-shattering intensity over his brain!

He was conscious of Cob standing beside him, looking out into this unknown universe and whispering in awe: "We're the aliens here . . ."

Ivy Hendricks came into the bridge then, a haggard look around her eyes. "I came up through the ventral blister," she said, "Bayne is down there and he's having fits. There isn't a star in sight he recognizes and the whole hull of the ship is *glowing*!"

Cob and Strykalski rushed back to the

port, straining to see the back-curving plates of the hull. Ivy was right. The metal, and to a lesser extent, even the leaded glassteel of the port was covered with a dim, dancing witchfire. It was as though the ship were being bombarded by a continuous shower of microscopic fire bombs.

Whitley found refuge in his favorite expression. "Ye gods and little catfish!"

Strike turned to Ivy. "What do you think it is?"

"I . . . I don't know. Matter itself might be different . . . here."

Strykowski found himself at the port again, looking out into the vast stretch of alien void. Terror was seeping like dampness through him, stretching cold fingers into his heart and mind. He realized that everyone on board must feel the same way. It was the old human devil rising from the pit of the primeval past. Fear of the unknown, of the strange. And there was loneliness. From the dark corners of his mind, the terrible loneliness came stealing forth. Never had a group of human beings been so frighteningly *apart* from their kind. He felt rejected, scorned and lost.

The others felt it, too. Ivy and Cob drew closer, until all three stood touching each other; as though they could dispel the loneliness of the unnatural environment by the warmth of human, animal contact. Celia came into the bridge softly . . . just to be near her friends.

It was only the fact that they could return at will to their own space . . . and the danger of the questing Eridans . . . that kept one or all from crying out in utter childish fear. Celia Graham whimpered softly and slipped her hand into Cob's. He squeezed it to give her a reassurance he did not feel.

Then Strike broke the spell. The effort was great, but it brushed away the shadows that had risen to plague them from the tortured abyss of racial memory. It brought them back to what they were: highly civilized people, parts of an intricately technological culture. Their ship was a part of that culture. The only part they could cling to. The *Cleopatra* demanded attention and service, and her demanding saved them.

"Cob," Strike directed with forced briskness, "Take over Damage Control. See what can be done about the second order drive."

Cob pulled himself together, smiling as all the accustomed pieces of his life began to fit together again. It didn't matter that they were in an unknown cosmos. Damage Control was something he knew and understood. He smiled thankfully and left the bridge.

"Maintain a continuous radar-watch, Celia. We can't tell what we may encounter here."

"Yes, Captain," replied Celia gratefully.

Strykowski reached for the squawk-box and called Bayne.

"Astrogation here," came the shaky reply. In the exposed blisters the agoraphobia must be more acute, reasoned Strike, and Bayne must have been subconsciously stirred up by the disappearance of the familiar stars that were his stock-in-trade.

"Plot us a course to 40 Eridani C, Bayne," Strykowski directed. "On gyro-headings."

"What?" The astrogator sounded as though he thought Strike had lost his mind. "Through *this* space?"

"Certainly," Strykowski insisted quietly. "You're so proud of your dead-reckoning. Here's a chance for you to do a real job. Get me an orbit."

"I . . . all right, Captain," grumbled Bayne.

Strike turned to Ivy Hendricks. "Well, Captain Hendricks, this is some gadget you have dreamed up out of your Project Warp," he breathed shakily. "At least the fat's out of the fire for the time being . . ."

Ivy looked out of the port and back with a shudder. "I hope so, Strike. I hope so."

They fell silent, seeking comfort in each other's presence.

THE second order drive repaired, Old Aphrodisiac moved out through the alien space toward the spot where 40 Eridani C existed on the other side of the barrier.

The ship's tactical astrophysicist brought

in some disturbing reports on the stars that shone brightly all around her. They fitted the accepted classifications in all particulars . . . except one. And that one had the scientist tearing his hair. The mass of every observable body except the ship herself was practically nonexistent. Even the two planetary systems discovered by the electron telescope flouted their impossible lack of mass.

Ivy suggested that since the *Cleopatra* and her crew were no part of this alien cosmos, no prime-space instruments could detect the errant mass. Like a microscopic bull in a gargantuan china shop, the Tellurian warship existed under a completely different set of physical and physical laws than did the heavenly bodies of this strange space.

It was pure conjecture, but it seemed well supported by the observable facts. The hull continued to glow with its unnatural witchfire, and soon disturbing reports were coming in from the Damage Control section that the thickness of the outer hull was actually being reduced. The rate was slow, and there was no immediate danger, but it was nevertheless unnerving to realize that Lover-Girl was being dissolved by *something*. Also, the outside Geigs recorded a phenomenal amount of short radiation emanating from the ship herself. The insulation kept most of it from penetrating, but tests showed that the strange radiation's source was the glow that clung stubbornly to the spacer's skin.

A tense week passed and then the ship neared the spot where a change over to prime space could be effected. According to Bayne's calculations, 40 Eridani C would be within 40,000,000 miles of them when the ship emerged from hyper space.

And then the Radar section picked up the planetoids. Millions of them, large and small, lay in a globular cluster dead ahead. They spread out in all directions for more than half a parsec . . . dull, rocky little worlds without a gram of detectable mass.

All that waited for the *Cleopatra* in her own cosmos was a hot reception at the hands of the defenders of 40 Eridani C II, while here was mystery at close range. Mystery that was not cosmic in scope . . .

just a swarm of innocuous seeming planetoids . . . the first explorable worlds that they had neared in this universe. Strike decided to heave to and examine their find. Ivy wanted samples and though no one said it in so many words . . . no one was anxious for another encounter with the rapacious Eridans. With typically human adaptiveness they had sublimated their fear of the unknown space in which they found themselves. Curiosity took the place of fear and here was something close at hand to probe. Anthropoid inquisitiveness prevailed.

THE *Cleopatra* slowed, stopped. Strike and Cob Whitley suited up and armed themselves with spring-guns. In their clumsy space armor they dropped through Lover-Girl's ventral valve into the void. The monitor's glowing bulk retreated as they jetted toward the swarm of tiny worlds. Their space suits, too, glowed with the witchfire, outlining them against the eternal night.

Back in the monitor's Communications shack, Ivy Hendricks and Celia Graham stood with Bayne and the other officers around the two way communicator that linked the two explorers with the ship.

Out in space, Strike and Cob bound themselves together with a length of thin cable. They dropped down under power toward the planetoid they had selected to explore.

"What's it like?" Ivy's voice crackled in their headsets.

"Can't tell from this distance. We're still a good five miles away," replied Strykalski.

"Looks like any other planetoid to me," avered Whitley.

"Maybe you'd better fire a shot into the surface before you try landing, Strike," Ivy suggested.

"Why?"

"Just a hunch." Her voice sounded worried.

"Okay, Ivy," Strike replied. "Cob, take a pot shot at it will you. You should be able to hit it from here . . . it's twenty miles wide."

Cob was disgusted. "And me the best shot in my class back at the Academy!"

He drew his pring gun and snapped a solid steel slug at the looming worldlet . . .

What happened next, they never knew exactly. On the dark surface of the planetoid a blazing bubble of white incandescence appeared, expanding within split seconds to all but obscure the whole bulk of the disk. It churned and whirled and flashed, mushrooming out in a hellish coruscation of destruction. The blaze of light outlined the two men and the ship and the planetoids within a fifty mile circle and the expanding shock wave fanned out. It struck the two space armored men to send them spinning wildly. The glowing bulk of the monitor reeled and bucked. Strike felt himself whipping up and down at the end of the cable that bound him to Cob Whitley. He felt himself being buffeted and burned by the dazzling flare of atomic fire. The merciful blackness spread itself like a curtain over his tortured eyes . . .

STRYKALSKI opened his eyes and stretched his battered body. His head was bandaged, and he could feel the familiar tingle of paratannic salve on his burns. Pain still throbbed in little red needles behind his dazzled eyes. He drew a long rasping breath and looked around him. He was in the *Cleopatra's* infirmary. A Medic was standing near the bulkhead. Cob lay on a bunk nearby. Ivy and Celia Graham were leaning over him.

"Great Space!" he muttered, "What happened?"

"The shot Cob fired . . . it . . . it blew up," Celia said.

"That's putting it rather mildly. But why? And how did we get back here?"

"Celia found you on the Radar," said Ivy, "And Bayne took a skeeterboat out and picked you up after we got Lover-Girl back right side up."

"Cob?"

As though in answer to Strykowski's question, a low moan came from the bandaged form of the Executive. "Ohhh . . . Ye gods and . . . little catfish! I wish I . . . had a Martini . . ."

Strike smiled through cut lips. Cob was all right. He looked up at Ivy again. "But what happened?"

"Listen!" Ivy was saying excitedly, "I've got it! The answer! All the answers, I think! The glowing of the ship . . . the lack of mass for everything native to this space . . . the solid shot exploding!"

Things were becoming clear to Strykowski now. Of course! He sat up painfully. It was really simple enough when one thought it through. In negative space . . .

Ivy went on. "Strike, the ship glows because there is matter everywhere . . . even in interstellar space. Not much, but enough to bombard the hull with tiny particles. The radiation the Geigs picked up is caused by atomic *disintegration*! We've had fission and fusion for two hundred years now . . . but this is the complete transmutation of matter to energy! The complete utilization of atomic energy! And the thing that causes it is the reaction between our kind of matter and . . ."

"*Contraterrene matter!*" he exclaimed. "That's it, isn't it Ivy?"

The girl nodded. "The charges of the atomic components are reversed in this space! You would have made yourself into a . . . a *bomb* if you had touched that planetoid out there!" Her face paled. "Oh, Strike! You almost killed yourself!"

Thoughts were boiling around in Strykowski's head now. An idea . . . a crazy, audacious idea was taking shape.

He swung his legs over the side of the bunk. "Listen, Ivy . . . in this space, *we* are the unnatural form of matter, and here we are sort of walking bombs. Right?"

She nodded, puzzled.

"Well, what if we should transport some contraterrene matter back into prime space . . . a planetoid for example . . . what then?"

The girl's face showed comprehension. "It would be the most devastating bomb ever dreamed of. It would release every erg in its component atoms the minute it came into contact with anything *terrene*!" She stopped short, her eyes wide. "Strike!"

"Would it work, Ivy?" he pursued.

"Yes!" she gasped, "Yes, I think it would!"

"Can we do it?"

"I . . . I think so. Lover-Girl has power to burn. And we could set up the

screens on two skeeterboats so that . . . yes! By heaven, it will work! All we have to do is make and set up the equipment!"

Cob sat up on his bunk and gave a low whistle. "Ye gods! No one can ever accuse you two of having small ideas, that's for sure!"

"It will work!" Ivy insisted. Her eyes narrowed. She was all the engineer now, working out a problem. "The explosion that almost killed you and set Lover-Girl on her beam ends came from the annihilation of one tiny slug of steel at a distance of five miles. Just think what the destruction of a twenty mile planetoid will do when we . . ."

"How long will it take?" Strike interrupted.

"Give me six hours."

"Start now," he ordered, "And somebody hand Cob and me our pants. We've got work to do!"

THE next hours were a nightmare of feverish activity aboard the T.R.S. *Cleopatra*. Two of her six skeeterboats were fitted with hyper screens that were made in the machine shop under Ivy Hendricks' close supervision. Power was shunted from the surge circuit generators and run out through automatic spools to the screen bearing skeeterboats to form the two poles of the hyper warp. Ivy was everywhere at once, giving orders, overseeing construction. Strike and Cob co-ordinated the efforts of the crew and workmen.

"We'll pick out our planetoid," Strike explained to them, "And line up our skeeters on an arbitrary north-south axis. The spools will pay out the power lines as the boats travel. When everything is aligned, we turn on the juice and hope for the best."

"Then," interjected Bayne, "As the planetoid takes its place in prime space without orbital velocity . . . and only some 4,000,000 miles from 40 Eridani C . . . we clear out. Fast. 40 Eridani C is an M6 star . . . surface temperature only about 3,000 Centigrade. It's small . . . smaller than Sol, because it has shrunk. But under its semi-solid crust there are trillions of tons of matter that will burst free as soon as anything cracks the sur-

face tension. Our bomb should act as a fuse to light one of the biggest fire-crackers ever imagined."

"One thing," said Ivy to Strike, "Whoever pilots the skeeters . . . and I presume you intend to handle one yourself . . . will have to be extremely careful. As soon as our planetoid exists in prime space it will have a planetoid's mass and gravity. Don't be caught with your jets cold. I'd miss you, Strike."

Celia Graham interrupted the conference to tell them that the equipment was ready, and the ship in position. Strike looked around at the suddenly tense faces of his companions. He didn't like to think what failure might mean to them . . . to Terra and the whole Solar Combine. He rose to his feet purposefully.

"Let's go," he said.

The skeeterboat dove out of the valve trailing its cable. Strike glanced back through the rear port to see the second shark-like shape close behind. Even banged up as he was, Cob would let no one take the second boat but himself. Strike's smile was broad. Good man to have around, that Coburn Whitley.

Ahead lay the tiny world that had been selected for annihilation. It was a black blot on the star-spangled darkness of space. A thirty mile sphere, it floated serenely along its orbit . . . an innocuous chunk of matter that *here* was just that . . . and elsewhere would be the most fearful bomb ever guided by the hand of man.

Strike looked back at the glowing shape of Old Aphrodisiac. She lured him like a familiar scene, a friendly voice. In all this alien vastness, only his beloved ship was safety.

He looked around for Cob's skeeter. It was barely visible now, some twenty miles away as it fanned out to take up its position at the south pole of the planetoid.

The tiny world drew near, and Strike veered to find his own station. Jockeying the skeeterboat carefully, he found the proper spot marked by the beacons that fanned out from the *Cleopatra's* prow and stern.

Cob signalled from the opposite pole that he, too, was ready. This, as they said in the flicks, was *it*.

He called Ivy on the radiophone.

"All right, Strike," her voice came back, "We'll all go through together. Ten seconds."

"Check."

"Remember to be ready to blast away from that chunk of rock, you two. As soon as it hits prime space it will have plenty of gravity."

"Right, Ivy," Cob's voice came metallicly.

"Six seconds . . .

"Five seconds . . .

"Four seconds . . . three . . . two . . . NOW!"

Strike was dazzled by the sudden shift of lighting. The planetoid was aglow with the dancing, swirling witchfire! The skeeterboat sank toward the bright surface with a sickening lurch. Strike shoved the throttle forward and looked fearfully for a flare of fire at the south pole. There was none. Cob had gotten clear, too. The power cable snapped, but it didn't matter now. Its work was done.

The *Cleopatra* lay ahead now, the fire gone from her hull. Behind her blazed the familiar beacon of Achernar. Off to the right Sirius A and B dominated the sky. And near at hand below, the turbulent, smoky red surface of 40 Eridani C smouldered against the familiar backdrop of the Milky Way. Already the contraterrene planetoid was plunging toward that sullen sphere. There wasn't much time to get clear.

Strike flung his skeeter through the open hatch close on the exhaust of Cob's boat. Valves hissed shut and Lover-Girl flashed away—homeward.

ONE week later, and just off Sirius B, Old Aphrodisiac met the Eridan fleet again, but with a difference . . .

This time the black ships made no move to stop her. Their actions were incoherent, insane. They milled about in a swirling cluster, colliding with their fellows or careening off into the void.

They floundered erratically, their co-ordination shattered. Even any evidence of intelligent guidance was missing.

The *Cleopatra* flashed by, not even deigning to fire a shot at them.

Strike shuddered as he watched them in the scanners. In his mind he could see the senseless, churning masses of flesh that lived mindlessly within the black hulls. His thoughts flew far afield to an icy world that had turned suddenly into an uninhabitable desert with temperatures soaring past the melting point of lead. He saw a dull red sun pulsating in cosmic agony, blossoming out into a menacing ball of white flame as its internal fires leaped to freedom through its shattered crust. He saw a star spending its failing substance prodigally in one bright carnival of destruction. And he saw its planets writhing as the sudden blast of heat speeded molecular velocities to the speed of escape and sent great clouds of superheated chlorine hissing into the void.

But best of all, he imagined the horrible death of a *thing* that was the sole co-ordinator and reasoning agent for a race of ugly tentacled creatures. Strykalski saw the death of the Eridan group-mind . . .

Old Aphrodisiac settled herself wearily onto the ramp of the Hamilton Field Spaceport. Her valves opened with a sighing sound. It was as though the ship herself had given voice to her contentment. She was home.

The lights of the Administration building glittered against the dark backdrop of the California hills, and the field lights flamed against the stillness of the night.

Strike and Ivy stood near the open port. "It's all over, Ivy," he said, "We're safe now."

Ivy raised her eyes to the sky where the stars flecked the night. Below Orion hung the jewelled thread of Eridanus.

The girl drew a shuddering breath. "It's a terrible thing to . . . to murder a star."

Strike remained silent. There was nothing to say.

It would take tardy light more than fifteen years to bring news of the sudden flare of reckless life in that small star . . . an orgy that would sap its last reserves of strength and leave it a dark and frigid ember in the lonely void.

PERIL ORBIT

By C. J. WEDLAKE



"Oh, hell!" Jim said and brought the gun's muzzle to his mouth.

Caught in the sun! The young pilot stared at the mass of angry flame—wondering why his training wouldn't let him give up.

A CROSS THE BLAZING FACE of the sun moved a round dark speck, a tiny, one-man space ship. It was very small, very close, and utterly helpless. The side facing the sun glowed dull red.

Inside, Jim MacDonald stood glumly regarding the thermometer on the pilot compartment bulkhead. Sweat made dark patches on the light blue of his uniform and ran in beads down his forehead. He rubbed his arm across his face. The thermometer read over two hundred. He shook his head slowly. It couldn't be that hot, heat must be conducting along the magnesium bulkhead to the instrument.

Jim ran his fingers through his hair to brush back the damp strands that clung to his forehead. The hand came away with little droplets clinging to his fingertips. He wiped it across his pants, and tapped the thermometer again. The pointer stayed where it was, stuck against the peg.

"About one forty-five," he guessed aloud, and turned to walk with a slow, dragging step across to the pilot's seat. Weakly he slumped down with his arms dangling loose over the chair arms, knuckles almost touching the deck. He sat very still trying to ignore the temperature in the compartment, but the hot stifle

wrapped around him and his chest heaved in a sigh.

Jim MacDonald was done for and he knew it. The thermo-couple to the outside skin showed three thousand degrees. The inside cooling system had not been built for this and had long since ceased to cope with the heat. There seemed to be no use continuing his grim little existence, or facing the worse smother of heat to come.

Yet, driven by the dull automatism of training and habit, he listlessly swung the stand with the ship's log over before him and noted his temperature readings. Then he critically reread what he had already written.

A few days ago, he had been using the gravitational field of the sun as a booster to help fling the little ship from Earth to Venus. In the mighty field, a space warp had funneled out, caught him, and sucked the ship toward the blazing maw.

The struggle to escape was a masterpiece of calculation. He had figured with such a nicety that his fuel had run out just at the moment the jet tubes at the rear became molten lumps on the ship's skin. He had escaped the warp. But it was a futile thing now, for the ship swung around the sun fuelless, inoperative, in a tight orbit that had a little initial inward momentum.

He had tried to radio for help, but radioing from where he was, was like trying to signal from the heart of an atomic bomb; if a signal got through, it would be only a part of the meaningless jabber of static that always came from here. And if the little black speck were seen, it would only be taken for a stray meteorite moving across the sun's incandescent face.

The ship was a little spherical world. It turned on its own axis once in an hour and twenty minutes. That was its little day. The orbit spiraled now a mere quarter million miles from the sun, one little year to two earth days. It moved closer at a rate that accelerated a few feet per second every second.

Eventually, said the impassive rows of equations in the log, the inward movement would stop, as keeping the same speed in a smaller circle, the ship's centrifugal force increased to set up an equilibrium. But

that point would be three thousand miles below the sun's surface. The ship would never reach it. Jim MacDonald inhabited a doomed little world.

HE chuckled. He even had a moon. The natural physical function of a few minutes before had left a jagged little chunk of ice swinging around the ship, outside the waste lock on the side away from the sun. But that wouldn't last long. It would pass into the hot light, and vanish in a puff of steam.

Now the plastic fittings of the compartment began to send up a nostril stinging stench. Jim leafed over a few pages in the log to the page printed at the top: ...SUGGESTIONS FOR REDSIGN OF SPACE-SHIPS.

Under his note, *Enlarge cooling systems, he wrote, Replace urea formaldehyde plastics with metals, and insulate compartment thermometers from bulkheads.*

Feeling foolish at the useless act of writing that which no one would ever read, Jim swung the log away. His tongue peeled from the roof of his mouth like a strip of adhesive tape and he dragged across the compartment for a drink. Glancing toward the sun, he held his aluminum cup under the spout and pressed the hot button gingerly. Although the windows on that side were blanked out almost purple, the sun's horizon glared through in a heaving mass of leaping gassy prominences.

Jim turned away, his face wrinkling into a grimace. Across the compartment a little cabinet held a pistol. It would be a simple sane thing to walk across there, take out the pistol and bring this to a sudden stop. He stepped toward it, then turned away ashamed. Spacemen didn't think like that.

Ahead of the ship something flared into incandescent brilliance. Waves of force pounded on the front, the deck heaved. Jim sprawled on his face and skidded over under the instrument panel, his cup clattering along beside him.

The deck scorched his hands and face. He wriggled out and dragged himself up to the chair, clinging tightly. But it was all over. He stood for a moment, waiting, then sat down.

Experimentally he caressed his burned face. Looking out the windows he tried to see some cause for the shock. Then he realized his moon was gone. It had passed out of the deep shadow into the penumbra of the ship and had been instantly vaporized. The shock had been its dissociated molecules pummeling the front of the ship.

He would have to be careful. If that could have passed directly into the full light instead of through the half shadow of the penumbra, the front of the ship might have caved in, softened as it was to near plasticity. Jim reached for the log again, but his hand stopped in mid air. With the spaceman's sensitivity to changes of state, he knew something was wrong. Something had changed in the shock of the moon's explosion.

He puzzled it over, but his heat befuddled brain refused to grasp things. He scanned all the instruments on the panel, but saw nothing unusual. At one side, he had a little tracer going, little drum turning with a needle scribing a red line. On it he had set the increase in the sun's pull against time to describe a curve. He examined this curve. The red line had changed direction suddenly; the sun's pull was increasing faster.

"Dammit!" he said. The force of the explosion in front had slowed him and shorn off some protective centrifugal force. Now he picked up points on the new curve, set down equations, and found he would die some twenty hours sooner than he had expected.

HIS mind began to revolt at the training that made him go on like this. The turning of the ship now showed him only the face of the sun. He looked at it a while, then shrugged his shoulders in disgust. Slowly he got up and walked toward the gun cabinet. The little door swung open as he pressed the button and he stared at the holstered weapon.

Leaving the door open, he walked away, looking back toward it. He retrieved his cup and filled it with tepid water. Throwing his head back he drained it at a gulp; then refilled it. He walked to the engine compartment door. It swung open at his touch, and he stepped into the tiny gang-

way. Here a tiny porthole looked out into the infinite blue-black deeps of space. Jim leaned against a bulkhead and wiped sweat from his eyes.

He tried to think. Not of escape, but of the frigid emptiness of space, the cool earth he had left behind. Into his mind came a fleeting glimpse of a lake back home on earth, a cold lake ringed with blu-green pines, jade waters where he had dived deep with the iciness stinging his skin. Against the metal bulkhead, his back began to burn. The vision faded. He realized he was thirsty all over.

He gulped his cup of water and went back to the pilot's compartment. At the open door of the gun cabinet, he stopped and sent his empty cup clattering against the sunward windows. He took the gun from the cabinet.

Back to the pilot's chair again. He toyed with the gun. The ship had turned now so that the other vast heaving horizon cut across the view. "Oh, hell!" Jim said, and brought the gun's muzzle to his mouth.

Then he lowered it, sweat poured down into his eyes as his forehead wrinkled in dull puzzlement. He should be thinking about something, he was forgetting something. Jim tried to cudgel his heat-becclouded brain into some semblance of order . . . Water, explosion, change of velocity . . . Where was the drain outlet for the water supply located?

He laid the gun aside and rifled through a drawer of blueprints, until he found the piping layout. Now he explored the maze of piping along the ship's sunward side. There it was, a little brass valve with a pipe leading to the outside skin.

The valve was hot enough to scald his hand. Jim carefully wrapped his handkerchief around the handle and twisted gently. Inside pressure squirted a thin stream of water from the supply tank into the hot vacuum of space. As it vaporized and dissociated into its atoms, Jim felt a mighty surge of expansion against the ship. The blows of a soft fist pummeled the side.

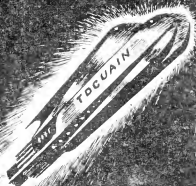
Jim groaned as the softened plates of the hull creaked and buckled, but he held the valve as it was. An inside panel split and let a thin sifting of insulation drift to the deck. His knee was against the

PER-ASPERA-AD-ASTRA

- through hope to the stars -

YOU, WHO HAVE BEEN
READING THESE PAGES
AND DREAMING - YES,

YOU-



- YOU

WILL SEE IT HAPPEN!

*For it's very close, now...
Those letters on the spaceship
stand for*

TECHNICAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE on UPPER ATMOSPHERE AND INTERPLANETARY NAVIGATION

*a body of experts on guided missiles,
atomic fuel, the ionosphere, etc.,
formed by the Institute of Navigation*

*to consider technical problems...
which relate to navigation in
the upper atmosphere and in*

***Interplanetary
Navigation***

deck plates and he became conscious of the burning through the cloth of his uniform. But he stayed there, until through the windows he saw nothing but the speckled black of space turn slowly up. Then he shut the valve off and, rubbing his burned knee, anxiously hobbled to the tracer.

The red line had not so much swoop to it now. "Ya!" he shouted exultantly. The centrifugal force from his forward velocity needed just a little help to begin pushing him away from the sun. Jim read the water tank gauge; about twenty gallons left.

FIDGETING, he waited another hour. The sun's horizon swung up into view, the blazing plain filled the windows and at last he saw again the other horizon. It would not do to twist the valve too soon; he had to wait until the outlet was directly toward the sun so he wouldn't lose any precious forward velocity.

The sun's horizon bisected the windows. Now! Encouraged by his other success, Jim twisted the valve hard. He stepped back so his sore knee would not rest against the plates.

The ship bounced like a beachball in the tremendous upshoot of the gases outside. Jim clung to a stanchion to keep from being knocked off his feet.

Like a rubber ball dimpled by a thumb, the ship's skin began to bulge inward. Jim tried to let go his hold to get the valve.

The bounce of the ship knocked him to his knees. A little steel desk came sliding across the compartment, banging him on the shoulder. He let go with one hand and shoved the desk between the bulging wall and a cross bulkhead. A white line appeared across the desk, and the paint crackled as it began to fold in the middle.

Jim let go and dived for the valve. A panel split wide and insulation poured out. A scream bubbled from his throat as radiation cut a line across his face.

He rolled away, then struggled to get to the valve again. But the push stopped. The tank was empty.

Groaning with the pain of his face, Jim went to his tracer. He forgot the burn as

he saw the curve now paralleled zero. No . . . it went up a little. Jim whooped for joy.

Now he scurried about the ship gathering together all the liquids he could find. Soup, fruit juice, medicines. He piled them beside the water tank and unscrewed the cap. Air whooshed in.

At the sound, Jim grinned. He left his pile of cans and bottles as they were, and unscrewed the cap to a spare oxygen tank. The compartment air pressure went up to about twenty five pounds. The excess of oxygen exhilarated him.

He looked over his pile of cans and bottles. He didn't like consomme, it went into the tank. Chicken broth followed. Everything he didn't like went into the tank, everything else stayed out. Then he patched the rip in the panel.

It was time. Jim crouched carefully beside the valve, opening it slowly. The mess inside the tank hissed out. Again the surge beat against the ship, but with the first groan of the hull, Jim throttled the valve down a little. His eyes were on the compartment pressure gauge. The consomme went and inside air began to hiss out. As it too expanded, the push on the hull continued.

When the sun's horizon was out of sight, the inside pressure registered only twelve pounds. Jim shut the valve off.

Now the tracer line was a nice curve upward.

Jim swung into the pilot's chair. He was a little oxygen drunk, but he made calculations grow on the page until he had his result. Then he leaned back and gave the universe a beatific smile.

His spiral now outward, would stop as soon as his orbit expanded and centrifugal force became less. As the forces came into balance, he would take up a permanent orbit around the sun. But that orbit lay well outside the region of heavy static, and he could radio for help. In his mind he already heard the sweet clang of magnetic grapples against the hull.

Jim reached for the log and began to letter neatly at the top of a new page:

SUGGESTIONS FOR SPACEMEN CAUGHT
IN THE SUN.



She pushed him back, but not quickly enough.

GARDEN OF EVIL

By MARGARET ST. CLAIR

Even to a drug-soaked outcast ethnographer Fyhon was a paradise planet. It was worth anybody's life to find Dridihad, the secret city of dread!

ERICSON RETURNED TO AN awareness of his personal identity quite suddenly. He had an impression that it was a long time, months at least, since he had been in a state of normal consciousness. At the back of his mind a memory of pain had imprinted itself as a signet makes an impression in

hot wax; he shied away from it. "Where am I?" he asked.

The green-skinned girl squatting beside him in the coppice looked at him sideways out of her dark jade eyes. "Hungry?" she asked.

"But where am—yes, I am hungry. Yes."

Mnathl—he knew, somehow, that that was her name. Didn't he remember her from the other side of the gulf in his memory, from the days when he had begged food in the streets of Penhain? Mnathl handed him a nicely-roasted *bosula* rib. He ate it avidly. He had always thought the *bosula* was the best of the food animals of Fyhon.

When the bone was gnawed clean she passed him, in a folded fresh green leaf, a mixed grill consisting of bits of *bosula* liver, kidney, tripe, salivary glands, and eyes. He ate that, too. When his stomach was full Erickson lay back with his arms under his head and looked at the big puffy clouds drifting overhead. He had no desire to think about himself or the things that had been happening to him in the last three or four months, but the thoughts came anyhow.

The chief thing was pain—remorseless, long-continued, pain. Mnathl had come to him one day when he was sitting on the dock in Penhain and told him they were going to Lake Tanais. He had got up and gone with her obediently; a *byhror* addict has little will of his own. The pain had begun after that.

There had been a barren island in the middle of the brackish, poisonous waters of the lake, and most of the time, until just latterly, he had been kept bound for fear he would drown himself in them. Mnathl . . . Mnathl had swum over from the mainland to tend him; she had bathed him and kept his body free of sores and vermin, set food before him and tried to coax him to eat. And twice a day she had given him injections of mercapulan with a hypodermic syringe. His arm was pocked with the needle marks. Where had she got the syringe and the drug? She must have stolen them from the big Colony Hospital in Penhain.

The injections had brought on the pain. Erickson, at the thought, felt sweat break out on his upper lip. What he had endured had been just at the edge of what a man could stand and still live. (His ordeal, had he known it, had been very much less than it would have been had he taken the drug cure in the hospital in Penhain. Mnathl, though she had not disdained the

help of terrestrial science, *knew* things about the Fyhonese flora and its properties that no terrestrial even suspected. Still, the ordeal had been bad enough.) Erickson shifted his position and sighed.

Mnathl had cured him of *byhror* addiction. In return, he had hated her. There had been weeks, he remembered, when his brain had held nothing but horrible pain and the wish to kill Mnathl. Once, when she had untied him for exercise, he had shammed sleep until she came close to him; then he had caught her by the throat. He had come close to killing her then. And no doubt in those long, maniacal days there had been other times.

Erickson raised himself on one elbow and looked at her. She was pouring water into a clay pot above the small, workman-like fire she had built, and was putting in bits of chopped *bosula* meat. Her greenish skin, the skin of a native of the South Polar continent, glittered slightly as she moved. "Mnathl . . ." he said.

She turned toward him quickly, but did not speak. "Mnathl, I'm sorry I tried to . . . hurt you on the island. I must have been pretty bad."

Mnathl almost smiled. "No matter," she said. "Pretty soon, soup."

THE incident seemed to be closed. Erickson lay back in the shade again and watched the movements of the *cloudscape* across the deep turquoise of the sky. His eyes felt as fresh as Adam's. The trees were green with the greenness of living emeralds, and the sun had an ardor and a richness like no sun he had ever known before.

Winds blew with caressive, sweet-smelling tendrils over his face, and from the warm soil beneath him he could almost feel strength soaking up again into his body cells. He had visited several planets since he had first left earth; he had loved none of them as he did Fyhon. Fyhon . . .

Arnaldo, the chunky little head of the paleo-biology department of Penhain University, had told him once that terrestrials loved Fyhon so because conditions on that planet were like those on Terra during the part of the Cenozoic when man was beginning to become man. Fyhon, he said, ap-

pealed to some deep-seated memory in humanity of what a planet ought to be.

Ericson had laughed at him. He was new to Fyhon then, with a temporary appointment as ethnographer to the South Polar Ethnographic Commission. Racial memory had seemed to him as out-moded a concept as spontaneous generation. But his temporary appointment had been extended once, and then once again, and by the end of the second period he had been wildly, hopelessly in love with Fyhon. He had hoped to get a permanent appointment, had hoped to stay on Fyhon for the rest of his life.

Ericson sighed again. After a while he raised one hand above his head and looked at it. He could see the bones and the joints of the bones and the movements of the sinews under the pale gold skin. The marks of Mnathl's hypodermic needle were faintly red. He ran his fingers down his body, surprised at the largeness and hardness of the rib cage, and the prominence of the sockets of his hips. His body felt attenuated and worn. But it was his body, no longer the property of *byhror* and the *byhror* emptiness. He held up his hand once more and looked at it against the light. He was beginning to realize that he was alive.

He drifted off into sleep. When he woke, Mnathl was holding out a steaming bowl to him. "Soup?" she said.

THEY stayed for some eight days in the coppice, while Ericson knotted his memories together. *Byhror* and the need for it were sinking back with the passage of each successive day into the status of things unalterably in the past. Mnathl set snares and hunted—she would not allow him to move a hand—and Ericson watched her almost incuriously. He felt a little more conscious every hour how good it was to be alive.

On the ninth day Mnathl poured water on the cooking fire. She nested the cooking pots together, slung them deftly over her shoulder, and contrived a belt of twisted vines for her hunting knife. "Go now," she announced.

Ericson got up obediently. "Are we going back to Penhairn?" he asked.

The corners of Mnathl's mouth twitched. "No," she said. "Way on up. On in. In Dridihad." She pointed with her thumb.

Ericson stared at her. "Dridihad?" he said. He'd heard the name before. It was . . . now wait . . . yes, it was the name the natives applied to the heart of the almost unknown South Polar Minor continent. "I can't go there. I've got to go back to Penhairn, now that I'm well. I've three years of *byhror* addiction to make up."

Mnathl's eyes narrowed. "Dridihad," she repeated stubbornly.

"But . . . Listen, Mnathl, I'm terribly grateful to you for what you've done for me. I never can thank you enough. But I couldn't go to Dridihad now, wherever it is. I'd need equipment—cameras, notebooks, guns, a tent. Right now I've got to go back to Penhairn, see about getting a job."

"All sorts of things to see," Mnathl said. She edged up to him. "You like. You like good." There was a prick in his arm. Mnathl had made other things in her cooking pots the last few days beside soup.

Ericson felt a peculiar glassy lethargy creeping over him. The sensation was not entirely unpleasant. It was as if he looked at his limbs and his body through a sheet of perfectly transparent crystal. He could see his actions and his movements with absolute clarity, but he had nothing to do with them.

"You like see Dridihad," Mnathl said. "All sorts of things for eth—ethnog—for man like you to look at. Come on. You like good." She started along a shadowy, green-roofed trail.

While Ericson watched with resentful detachment, his body began obediently to follow her. Speech as well as volition had deserted him, and all he could do was to move silently in her steps.

As mile succeeded silent mile, memory and common sense came to his aid. There had been a time, nearly three years ago, when he had set out to explore the periphery of the minor polar continent by himself. His temporary appointment had expired, and he had been moving heaven and earth to get it made permanent. The one-man expedition had been a part of the general heaven-and-earth moving process;

it had occurred to him that the Ethnographic Commission might be inclined to view his application more favorably if he could offer the Commission a piece of original ethnographic research, such as a report on the natives in the periphery would be.

His attempt had been a miserable failure; indeed, he owed his former *byhror* addiction to it. His supplies had been eaten by animals, he had poisoned himself with tainted *chornis* liver, fever had attacked him. In his fits of feverish delirium he had thrown away nearly everything, even his hunting knife. In order to get back to Penhairn at all he had had to resort to chewing the leaves of the *byhror* plant. The leaves contain a remarkable stimulant; Ericson had been able to get his fever-racked body back to civilization alive. But it had been at the cost of slavish addiction to the drug.

And now Mnathl—bless her greenish skin and queer flat eyes—was offering him a journey to the mysterious heart of the minor polar continent. Offering it to him on a silver platter. A piece of original ethnographic research. He had been ungrateful and a fool. "You like good," she had said. Well, she ought to know.

The effects of the drug she had pricked his arm with must be wearing off. Ericson found he could smile. "Why are we going to Dridihad, Mnathl?" he asked a little later.

Mnathl shook her sleek green head without even turning around to him. "No," she said.

THE trip in to Dridihad was a seduction, an enchantment, a bliss. Ericson's strength came flooding back to him. His sick pallor was turning to rich gold. On the second day he whittled, under Mnathl's guidance, a spear and a throwing-stick for it, and on the third and fourth she taught him to set snares and kindle fires with a sliver of *onchian*. The country grew wilder and more beautiful, the trees taller, the sky a deeper blue, the waterfalls more loud. He tried to question the girl, but she never answered anything except "No," and after a little, in his happiness, he gave up asking questions.

What did it matter, after all? He was learning from day to day secrets that any geographer or ethnographer would have given the best years of his life to learn; the piece of original ethnographic research was becoming a reality; and who, except a fool, questions someone who has not only restored him to life but is giving him his heart's desire?

On the eighteenth day, when Ericson's body had filled out and been turned to a living gold by the sun, they came across the pyramid. It stood in a swale with purple flowers growing around it and a small river flowing around one side, and it was so tall that Ericson, looking dizzily up, swore he saw clouds floating around its top. He wanted to stay and look at it, to record it in his mind, but Mnathl was not impressed. She let him have two hours, and then she urged him on.

"But who built it, Mnathl?" he demanded when he had been pulled reluctantly away. "How did it get here?"

Mnathl seemed to be debating whether to answer him. He could never decide whether she was naturally taciturn, or whether she really grudged telling him things. "My people built it," she said at last. "Deidrithes. Long time ago. Long time ago." She motioned vaguely with her hand.

Something in the gesture made Ericson see with sudden clarity how deep the abyss of the past, even on this young world with the ardent sun, really was. Fyhon was young; but the Deidrithes had been living on Fyhon a long time.

Two days later Ericson, contrary to their usual custom, was in the lead, breaking trail. Mnathl caught him suddenly around the waist and pulled him back, but she was not quick enough. The huge, thick-bodied snake with the red bandings lashed out at him and just fell short. But one glistening fang grazed his foot.

Mnathl, bleached by fear to the color of an inferior grade of jade, killed the snake with a stone. Then she made Ericson sit down on the grass, and slashed at his foot with her hunting knife.

"What is it, Mnathl?" Ericson asked. The wound was not especially painful, but his heart had already begun to beat slowly

and wearily, as if beating were a burden almost beyond its strength, and at the same time it seemed to have grown until it threatened to burst his chest.

"*Outis*," Mnathl answered briefly. She hesitated for a moment. "Bad," she said, as if to herself. "Very bad. Could kill me too." Then she leaned over and set her lips to the bleeding gash her knife had made.

Ericson tried to draw away from her. He was so dizzy that he could hardly see. "No," he croaked, "don't. You musn't suck it, Mnathl. I don't want you to risk your life."

The green-skinned girl shrugged. "No matter," she answered. "Will do. O. K."

Ericson tried to push her from him, but he was too weak. The world was receding from him in black waves. She sucked blood and poison from the wound, spat, sucked, spat, and sucked again.

He would have liked to protest, to thank her for her sacrifice, but he had no time. His pulse had begun to flutter feebly, and he fainted.

FOR the next several days he was in a stupor most of the time. Whenever he came back to consciousness, he saw Mnathl lying exhausted in the grass near him, and he knew without being told that the poison she had sucked from his wound was moving sluggishly and with slow malignity through her veins. Nevertheless, the wound on his foot was always cleanly dressed and plastered with fresh herbs, and from time to time she opened it with her knife and let the pus escape.

When they were finally on the road to Dridihad again, he tried to thank her for what she had done.

"Anything I can do for you, Mnathl," he wound up with some embarrassment (it is difficult to thank someone who refuses to look at you), "anything I can do for you, why, you let me know. I could have died there, without ever getting my permanent appointment or seeing Dridihad. We're friends, aren't we, Mnathl? Friends." He took her hand.

Mnathl nodded curtly. "O. K.," she said. She pulled her fingers from his. The

Deidrithe, Ericson thought not for the first time, were an impassive, unemotional folk.

It took them nearly a month more to get to Dridihad. On the way they had to ford two swollen rivers and beat off the attack of a must-maddened bull *rhodops*. Neither of these incidents had any consequences. On the sixty-sixth day after their departure from Lake Tanais, they came to the foot of Dridihad.

For a week or so the ground had been rising steadily and the air growing crisp and thin. They had labored uphill, uphill. Dridihad itself, built on a high plateau, had been visible for three days before they reached it, a silhouette, faintly pinkish, against the clouds. When they had first caught sight of it, Ericson had felt an almost painful anticipation seize him, and even Mnathl, usually so impassive, had shown, in her glowing face and quickened breathing, how excited she was.

The ascent to the plateau itself, along a path so precipitous that Ericson was always having to clutch it with hands as well as feet, was so toilsome that fatigue had dimmed his curiosity a little when they arrived at the top. Earlier that day Mnathl had thrown the cooking pots and the knife contemptuously over the side of the cliff, and now, cupping her hands around her lips and standing almost arrogantly erect, she strode up to the rosy-red, eroded battlements.

"Klaret laoi!" she called. "Laoi, klaret!" So far as Ericson could see, no one at all was listening. But after a moment the massy doors of the gate began to open outward, ponderously, in the twilight. They went in.

Dridihad, Ericson saw at first glance, was much larger and more populous than he had supposed from below. The low, stepped buildings, all made of the rose-pink stone, seemed to stretch out for mile upon mile, as far as he could see. They made upon him an impression of antiquity so strong that it was almost disturbing. The small greenish people like Mnathl were everywhere. In dots, trickles and rivulets they were pouring out into the streets.

Mnathl's eyes fell on a man near her. She spoke to him. Instantly he bowed

profoundly before her, and made a second, shallower obeisance to Ericson.

"Go with him," Mnathl said, turning to the ethnographer. "Sleep in his house." Obediently, Ericson followed his guide. When he looked around toward Mnathl, she had already disappeared.

The man (his name seemed to be Boator) took Ericson to an airy suite of rooms on the top floor of one of the biggest of the houses of red stone. Attendants waited on him with food and drink and water for bathing. They took away his dirt-encrusted, ragged clothing and brought him a heavy greenish robe. After Ericson had bathed and put it on, he inspected himself in the sheet of polished metal that served for a looking glass and decided that the color of the fabric made his curling beard and fair skin look as if they had been cast from yellow gold.

He was tired, but far too excited to rest.

The chief thing, the indubitable, the incredible thing, was that there was a very old, a very populous city, a city whose existence no one had even suspected, in the heart of the South Polar Minor continent. It was news to inflame an ethnographer to the point of hysteria. When Ericson got back to Penhain with his report, it was going to revolutionize their whole concept of Fyhonese history; one would hardly exaggerate to say that it would be epoch-making news. No doubt there would be a period when they'd consider him the biggest liar since Marco Polo. But after the first skepticism wore off he'd have a permanent ethnographic appointment almost forced upon him. His report would shake established reputations, found new schools, would—oh, if he only had something to write on!

When the attendant came in again, Ericson made motions of writing in the palm of his hand, but the man's face remained blank. And when he asked for Mnathl the attendant merely shook his head and went out.

For want of anything better the young man hung out of the window watching the smoky flicker of lights in the city around him. It was not until the last one had gone out that he went, reluctantly, to bed.

NEXT morning, immediately after breakfast, Mnathl came to visit him. He hardly knew her at first. The scanty garments she had worn unconcernedly on their journey to Dridihiad had been replaced by the stiff, hieratic folds of a dull purple robe embroidered in blue. On her head there was a silvery crown of antique workmanship, set with luminous purple stones, and she moved with the conscious dignity of a princess or a priest.

Her manner toward him, too, had changed. She smiled faintly when she first saw him, and everything about her seemed freer than Ericson had seen it before. She was animated, almost vivacious.

He asked her for something to write with. "No," she answered, still with that faint smile, "no use. Hunt now."

They left Boator's house by a side door (to avoid the crowd that would appear at once if they were glimpsed in the streets, Ericson surmised) and entered a small, walled court. There four improbably striped animals, about the size of small ponies, were waiting for them. Ericson mounted one of them, and Mnathl, tucking up her skirts, bestrode another. With two attendants they rode circuitously through Dridihiad and out into the high plain.

The variety and abundance of game were amazing. There seemed to be more animals than there were trees, and they came in all sizes, shapes, colors, and coats. There was even a big blue-hued thing that reminded the young man a little of a kangaroo. He enjoyed himself, but he could not help wishing that he knew more about Fyhonese zoology than he did—to appreciate all those properly.

They got back to the city just before dark. Ericson ate, and then Mnathl took him to the temple. It was the tallest building in Dridihiad, a stepped pyramid of unusually reddish stone, and Ericson was to grow fond, later, of the view from its flat top. The naos itself, however, was a small room skimpily scooped out of one side of the pyramid, and it was very badly lighted. Ericson, who had resolved, in default of paper to write on, to impress all he saw and heard irremovably upon his mind, had to strain his eyes to see anything.

Mnathl officiated. His first feeling that she was a priestess seemed to be correct. As to the ritual itself, it was highly impressive, especially when one considered that he did not know the language in which it was going on. It ended with the sacrifice of an animal like a *bosula*; while two attendants held it, Mnathl cut its throat, caught the blood in a cup, and poured it on the altar fire. Then she roasted pieces of the meat over the coals and dealt them out among the celebrants of the ceremony, partaking first herself. None of the collops was offered to Ericson; but, then, he could hardly be considered a communicant of the religion of the Deidrithe, whatever it was.

As the days passed, a possible explanation of Mnathl's treatment of him began to come to Ericson. He was not a conceited man, or it might have occurred to him earlier. And it bothered him to think that she was attracted to him, whereas he had never found her attractive in any way. Still, what other hypothesis would account for the facts?

They were together almost constantly and, except for the attendants who were always armed with heavy axes, always alone. She hunted with him, showed him the city, rode with him; she even taught him to play a rather childish game, something like the Sicilian Mora, which she always beat him at. Day after day she took him with her to witness religious rites which were obviously of the most hallowed character. Ericson had the impression that the rites were leading, in a series of slight graduations, up to some supreme event! and he tried to note and remember everything.

THE climax came suddenly. One lovely evening, just as the full moon was rising, Mnathl took him with her up the steep sides to the top of the pyramid. The two attendants hovered discreetly in the background. For all practical purposes, he and the girl were alone.

Mnathl looked at him. There was a glint, warm, glowing, and facile, in her eyes that he had never seen there before. There was a short but rather embarrassing

silence. At last Ericson, feeling like a boor and a churl, took her hand.

"Mnathl," he said, "I'm so grateful to you. You've done so much for me, helped me so much. You . . . mean a lot to me, Mnathl." That, at least, was true.

Mnathl pulled her fingers away and regarded him. "What you mean?" she asked blankly. "What you mean?"

"That you . . . that I . . ." he stopped, too embarrassed to go on.

Mnathl threw back her head and laughed. It was the first time he had ever heard the sound from her, and there was something strange in it. She motioned to the axmen with her hand.

"Not like, not hate," she said blandly. "Let you see, let you hear, so you tell them all that Deidrithe do. You our messenger. Then we eat."

Then we eat . . . For a moment the words echoed meaninglessly in Ericson's mind. The axmen were forcing him to his knees near a depression in the center of the pyramid. "But why . . ." he said.

"We hear about you the first time you try trip," Mnathl said. "Everybody know. No other men your color in Fyhon."

His color. Ericson began to understand. Mnathl's devotion, her self-sacrificing tenacity, her long kindness to him, everything—had all been nothing but the prelude to a ritual meal in which his rare blonde body was to be the chief support. No doubt a man of his color would be an especially choice offering to the gods. The gleam he had seen in Mnathl's eyes had been not love, but a kind of religious gluttony.

He began to laugh. Irony had always appealed to him; and besides he was remembering a sentence in the Ethnographic Commission's preliminary survey: "There is no doubt that ritual cannibalism is unknown among the natives of Fyhon."

"O. K., Mnathl," he said, recalling what he had been saved from, what he had seen and learned. "I'm ahead, no matter how you look at it. It's O.K."

He was still smiling when the axman on the right struck and Ericson's severed head went rolling along the surface of the pyramid.

Stalemate In Space

By CHARLES L. HARNESS

Two mighty metal globes clung in a murderous death-struggle, lashing out with flames of poison. Yet deep in their twisted, radioactive wreckage the main battle raged—where a girl swayed sensuously before her conqueror's mocking eyes.

AT FIRST THERE WAS ONLY the voice, a monotonous murmur in her ears.

"Die now—die now—die now—"

Evelyn Kane awoke, breathing slowly and painfully. The top of the cubicle was bulging inward on her chest, and it seemed likely that a rib or two was broken. How long ago? Years? Minutes? She had no way of knowing. Her slender right hand found the oxygen valve and turned it. For a long while she lay, hurting and breathing helplessly.

"Die now—die now—die now—"

The votron had awakened her with its heart-breaking code message, and it was her duty to carry out its command. Nine years after the great battle globes had crunched together the mentors had sealed her in this tiny cell, dormant, unwaking, to be livened only when it was certain her countrymen had either definitely won—or lost.

The votron's telepathic dirge chronicled the latter fact. She had expected nothing else.

She had only to find the relay beside her cot, press the key that would set in motion gigantic prime movers in the heart of the great globe, and the conquerors would join the conquered in the wide and nameless grave of space.

But life, now doled out by the second, was too delicious to abandon immediately. Her mind, like that of a drowning person, raced hungrily over the memories of her past.

For twenty years, in company with her great father, she had watched *The Defender* grow from a vast metal skeleton into a planet-sized battle globe. But it had not grown fast enough, for when the Scythian globe, *The Invader*, sprang out of black space to enslave the budding Terran Con-

federacy, *The Defender* was unfinished, half-equipped, and undermanned.

The Terrans could only fight for time and hope for a miracle.

The Defender, commanded by her father, Gordon, Lord Kane, hurled itself from its orbit around Procyon and met *The Invader* with giant fission torpedoes.

And then, in an intergalactic proton storm beyond the Lesser Magellanic Cloud, the globes lost their bearings and collided. Hordes of brute-men poured through the crushed outer armor of the stricken *Defender*.

The prone woman stirred uneasily. Here the images became unreal and terrible, with the recurrent vision of death. It had taken the Scythians nine years to conquer *The Defender's* outer shell. Then had come that final interview with her father.

"In half an hour our last space port will be captured," he had telepathed curtly. "Only one more messenger ship can leave *The Defender*. Be on it."

"No. I shall die here."

His fine tired eyes had studied her face in enigmatic appraisal. "Then die usefully. The mentors are trying to develop a force that will destroy both globes in the moment of our inevitable defeat. If they are successful, you will have the task of pressing the final button of the battle."

"There's an off-chance you may survive," countered a mentor. "We're also working on a means for your escape—not only because you are Gordon's daughter, but because this great proton storm will prevent radio contact with Terra for years, and we want someone to escape with our secret if and when our experiments prove successful."

"But you must expect to die," her father had warned with gentle finality.

She clenched her fingernails vehemently



She fought for her life under that mile-high ceiling.

into her palms and wrenched herself back to the present.

That time had come.

With some effort she worked herself out of the crumpled bed and lay on the floor of her little cubicle, panting and holding her chest with both hands. The metal floor was very cold. Evidently the enemy torpedo fissionables had finally broken through to the center portions of the ship, letting in the icy breath of space. Small matter. Not by freezing would she die.

She reached out her hand, felt for the all-important key, and gasped in dismay. The mahogany box containing the key had burst its metal bonds and was lying on its side. The explosion that had crushed her cubicle had been terrific.

With a gurgle of horror she snapped on her wrist luminar and examined the interior of the box.

It was a shattered ruin.

ONCE the fact was clear, she composed herself and lay there, breathing hard and thinking. She had no means to construct another key. At best, finding the rare tools and parts would take months, and during the interval the invaders would be cutting loose from the dead hulk that clutched their conquering battle globe in a metallic rigor mortis.

She gave herself six weeks to accomplish this stalemate in space.

Within that time she must know whether the prime movers were still intact, and whether she could safely enter the pile room herself, set the movers in motion, and draw the moderator columns. If it were unsafe, she must secure the unwitting assistance of her Scythian enemies.

Still prone, she found the first-aid kit and taped her chest expertly. The cold was beginning to make itself felt, so she flicked on the chaudiere she wore as an under-garment to her Scythian woman's uniform. Then she crawled on her elbows and stomach to the tiny door, spun the sealing gear, and was soon outside. Ignoring the pain and pulling on the side of the imitation rock that contained her cell, she got slowly to her feet. The air was thin indeed, and frigid. She turned the valve of her portable oxygen bottle almost sub-

consciously, while exploring the surrounding blackened forest as far as she could see. Mentally she was alert for roving alien minds. She had left her weapons inside the cubicle, except for the three things in the little leather bag dangling from her waist, for she knew that her greatest weapon in the struggle to come would be her apparent harmlessness.

Four hundred yards behind her she detected the mind of a low-born Scythe, of the Tharn sun group. Very quickly she established it as that of a tired, brutish corporal, taking a mop-up squad through the black stumps and forlorn branches of the small forest that for years had supplied oxygen to the defenders of this sector.

The corporal could not see her green Scythian uniform clearly, and evidently took her for a Terran woman. In his mind was the question: Should he shoot immediately, or should he capture her? It had been two months since he had seen a woman. But then, his orders were to shoot. Yes, he would shoot.

Evelyn turned in profile to the beam-gun and stretched luxuriously, hoping that her grimace of pain could not be detected. With satisfaction, she sensed a sudden change of determination in the mind of the Tharn. The gun was lowered, and the man was circling to creep up behind her. He did not bother to notify his men. He wanted her first. He had seen her uniform, but that deterred him not a whit. Afterwards, he would call up the squad. Finally, they would kill her and move on. Women auxiliaries had no business here, anyway.

Hips dipping, Evelyn sauntered into the shattered copse. The man moved faster, though still trying to approach quietly. Most of the radions in the mile-high ceiling had been destroyed, and the light was poor. He was not surprised when he lost track of his quarry. He tip-toed rapidly onward, picking his way through the charred and fallen branches, thinking that she must turn up again soon. He had not gone twenty yards in this manner when a howl of unbearable fury sounded in his mind, and the dull light in his brain went out.

Breathing deeply from her mental effort, the woman stepped from behind a great

black tree trunk and hurried to the unconscious man. For I.Q.'s of 100 and less, telepathic cortical paralysis was quite effective. With cool efficiency and no trace of distaste she stripped the odorous uniform from the man, then took his weapon, turned the beam power down very low, and needled a neat slash across his throat. While he bled to death, she slipped deftly into the baggy suit, clasped the beam gun by the handle, and started up the sooty slope. For a time, at least, it would be safer to pass as a Tharn soldier than as any kind of a woman.

II

THE INQUISITOR LEANED forward, frowning at the girl before him.

"Name?"

"Evelyn Kane."

The eyes of the inquisitor widened. "So you admit to a Terran name. Well, Terran, you are charged with having stolen passage on a supply lorry, and you also seem to be wearing the uniform of an infantry corporal as well as that of a Scythian woman auxiliary. Incidentally, where is the corporal? Did you kill him?"

He was prepared for a last-ditch denial. He would cut it short, have the guards remove her, and execution would follow immediately. In a way, it was unfortunate. The woman was obviously of a high Terran class. No—he couldn't consider that. His slender means couldn't afford another woman in his quarters, and besides, he wouldn't feel safe with this cool murderess.

"Do you not understand the master tongue? Why did you kill the corporal?" He leaned impatiently over his desk.

The woman stared frankly back at him with her clear blue eyes. The guards on either side of her dug their nails into her arms, as was their custom with recalcitrant prisoners, but she took no notice.

She had analyzed the minds of the three men. She could handle the inquisitor alone or the two guards alone, but not all three.

"If you aren't afraid of me, perhaps you'd be so kind as to send the guards out

for a few minutes," she said, placing a hand on her hip. "I have interesting information."

So that was it. Buy her freedom by betraying fugitive Terrans. Well, he could take the information and then kill her. He nodded curtly to the guards, and they walked out of the hut, exchanging sly winks with one another.

Evelyn Kane crossed her arms across her chest and felt her broken rib gingerly. The inquisitor stared up at her in sadistic admiration. He would certainly be on hand for the execution. His anticipation was cut short with a horrible realization. Under the paralyzing force of a mind greater than his own, he reached beneath the desk and switched off the recorder.

"Who is the Occupational Commandant for this Sector," she asked tersely. This must be done swiftly before the guards returned.

"Perat, Viscount of Tharn," replied the man mechanically.

"What is the extent of his jurisdiction?"

"From the center of the Terran globe, outward four hundred miles radius."

"Good. Prepare for me the usual visa that a woman clerk needs for passage to the offices of the Occupational Commandant."

The inquisitor filled in blanks in a stiff sheet of paper and stamped a seal at its bottom.

"You will add in the portion reserved for 'comments', the following: 'Capable clerk. Others will follow as they are found available.'"

The man's pen scratched away obediently.

Evelyn Kane smiled gently at the impotent, inwardly raging inquisitor. She took the paper, folded it, and placed it in a pocket in her blouse. "Call the guards," she ordered.

He pressed the button on his desk, and the guards re-entered.

"This person is no longer a prisoner," said the inquisitor woodenly. "She is to take the next transport to the Occupational Commandant of Zone One."

When the transport had left, neither inquisitor nor guards had any memory of the woman. However, in the due course of

events, the recording was gathered up with many others like it, boxed carefully, and sent to the Office of the Occupational Commandant, Zone One, for auditing.

EVELYN was extremely careful with her mental probe as she descended from the transport. The Occupational Commandant would undoubtedly be high-born and telepathic. He must not have occasion to suspect a similar ability in a mere clerk.

Fighting had passed this way, too, and recently. Many of the buildings were still smoking, and many of the radions high above were either shot out or obscured by slowly drifting dust clouds. The acrid odor of radiation-remover was everywhere.

She caught the sound of spasmodic small-arm fire.

"What is that?" she asked the transport attendant.

"The Commandant is shooting prisoners," he replied laconically.

"Oh."

"Where did you want to go?"

"To the personnel office."

"That way." He pointed to the largest building of the group—two stories high, reasonably intact.

She walked off down the gravel path, which was stained here and there with dark sticky red. She gave her visa to the guard at the door and was admitted to an improvised waiting room, where another guard eyed her stonily. The firing was much nearer. She recognized the obscene coughs of a Faeg pistol and began to feel sick.

A woman in the green uniform of the Scythe auxiliary came in, whispered something to the guard, and then told Evelyn to follow her.

In the anteroom a grey cat looked her over curiously, and Evelyn frowned. She might have to get rid of the cat if she stayed here. Under certain circumstances the animal could prove her deadliest enemy.

The next room held a foppish little man, evidently a supervisor of some sort, who was studying her visa.

"I'm very happy to have you here, S'ria

—ah—"—he looked at the visa suspiciously—"S'ria Lyn. Do sit down. But, as I was just remarking to S'ria Gerek, here"—he nodded to the other woman, who smiled back—"I wish the field officers would make up their august minds as to whether they want you or don't want you. Just why did they transfer you to H.Q.?"

She thought quickly. This pompous little ass would have to be given some answer that would keep him from checking with the inquisitor. It would have to be something personal. She looked at the false black in his eyebrows and sideburns, and the artificial way in which he had combed hair over his bald spot. She crossed her knees slowly, ignoring the narrowing eyes of S'ria Gerek, and smoothed the back of her braided yellow hair. He was studying her covertly.

"The men in the fighting zones are uncouth, S'rin Gorph," she said simply. "I was told that *you*, that is, I mean—"

"Yes?" he was the soul of graciousness. S'ria Gerek began to dictate loudly into her mechanical transcriber.

Evelyn cleared her throat, averted her eyes, and with some effort, managed a delicate flush. "I meant to say, I thought I would be happier working for—working here. So I asked for a transfer."

S'rin Gorph beamed. "Splendid. But the occupation isn't over, yet, you know. There'll be hard work here for several weeks yet, before we cut loose from the enemy globe. But you do your work well"—winking artfully—"and I'll see that—"

He stopped, and his face took on a hunted look of mingled fear and anxiety. He appeared to listen.

Evelyn tensed her mind to receive and deceive a mental probe. She was certain now that the Zone Commandant was high-born and telepathic. The chances were only fifty-fifty that she could delude him for any length of time if he became interested in her. He must be avoided if at all possible. It should not be too difficult. He undoubtedly had a dozen personal secretaries and/or concubines and would take small interest in the lowly employees that amused Gorph.

Gorph looked at her uncertainly. "Perat, Viscount of the Tharn Suns, sends you

his compliments and wishes to see you on the balcony." He pointed to a hallway. "All the way through there, across to the other wing."

As she left, she heard all sound in the room stop. The transcribing and calculating machines trailed off into a watchful silence, and she could feel the eyes of the men and women on her back. She noticed then that the Faeg had ceased firing.

HER heart was beating faster as she walked down the hall. She felt a very strong probe flooding over her brain casually, palping with mild interest the artificial memories she supplied: Escapades with officers in the combat areas. Reprimands. Demotion and transfer. Her deception of Gorph. Her anticipation of meeting a real Viscount and hoping he would let her dance for him.

The questing probe withdrew as idly as it had come, and she breathed a sigh of relief. She could not hope to deceive a suspicious telepath for long. Perat was merely amused at her "lie" to his under-supervisor. He had accepted her at her own face value, as supplied by her false memories.

She opened the door to the balcony and saw a man leaning moodily on the balustrade. He gave no immediate notice of her presence.

The five hundred and sixth heir of Tharn was of uncertain age, as were most of the men of both globes. Only the left side of his face could be seen. It was gaunt and leathery, and a deep thin scar lifted the corner of his mouth into a satanic smile. A faint paunch was gathering at his abdomen, as befitted a warrior turned to boring paper work. His closely cut black hair and the two sparkling red-gemmed rings—apparently identical—on his right hand seemed to denote a certain fastidiousness and unconscious superiority. To Evelyn the jeweled fingers bespoke an unnatural contrast to the past history of the man and were symptomatic of a personality that could find stimulation only in strange and cruel pleasures.

In alarm she suddenly realized that she had inadvertently let her appraisal penetrate her uncovered conscious mind, and

that this probe was there awaiting it.

"You are right," he said coldly, still staring into the court below. "Now that the long battle is over, there is little left to divert me."

He pushed the Faeg across the coping toward her. "Take this."

He had not as yet looked at her.

She crossed the balcony, simultaneously grasping the pistol he offered her and looking down into the courtyard. There seemed to be nearly twenty Terrans lying about, in pools of their own blood.

Only one man, a Terran officer of very high rank—was left standing. His arms were folded somberly across his chest, and he studied the killer above him almost casually. But when the woman came out, their eyes met, and he started imperceptibly.

Evelyn Kane felt a horrid chill creeping over her. The man's hair was white, now, and his proud face lined with deep furrows, but there could be no mistake. It was Gordon, Lord Kane.

Her father.

The sweat continued to grow on her forehead, and she felt for a moment that she needed only to wish hard enough, and this would be a dream. A dream of a big, kind, dark-haired man with laugh-wrinkles about his eyes, who sat her on his knee when she was a little girl and read bedtime stories to her from a great book with many pictures.

An icy, amused voice came through: "Our orders are to kill all prisoners. It is entertaining to shoot down helpless men, isn't it? It warms me to know that I am cruel and wanton, and worthy of my trust."

Even in the midst of her horror, a cold, analytical part of her was explaining why the Commandant had called her to the balcony. Because all captured Terrans had to be killed, he hated his superiors, his own men, and especially the prisoners. A task so revolting he could not relegate to his own officers. He must do it himself, but he wanted his underlings to know he loathed them for it. She was merely a symbol of that contempt. His next words did not surprise her.

"It is even more stimulating to require

a shuddering female to kill them. You are shuddering you know?"

She nodded dumbly. Her palm was so wet that a drop of sweat dropped from it to the floor. She was thinking hard. She could kill the Commandant and save her father for a little while. But then the problem of detonating the pile remained, and it would not be solved more quickly by killing the man who controlled the pile area. On the contrary if she could get him interested in her——

"So far as our records indicate," murmured Perat, "the man down there is the last living Terran within *The Defender*. It occurred to me that our newest clerk would like to start off her duties with a bang. The Faeg is adjusted to a needle-beam. If you put a bolt between the man's eyes, you may dance for me tonight, and perhaps there will be other nights——"

The woman seemed lost in thought for a long time. Slowly, she lifted the ugly little weapon. The doomed Terran looked up at her peacefully, without expression. She lowered the Faeg, her arm trembling.

Gordon, Lord Kane, frowned faintly, then closed his eyes. She raised the gun again, drew cross hairs with a nerveless wrist, and squeezed the trigger. There was a loud, hollow cough, but no recoil. The Terran officer, his eyes still closed and arms folded, sank to the ground, face up. Blood was running from a tiny hole in his forehead.

The man leaning on the balustrade turned and looked at Evelyn, at first with amused contempt, then with narrowing, questioning eyes.

"Come here," he ordered.

The Faeg dropped from her hand. With a titanic effort she activated her legs and walked toward him.

He was studying her face very carefully.

She felt that she was going to be sick. Her knees were so weak that she had to lean on the coping.

With a forefinger he lifted up the mass of golden curls that hung over her right forehead and examined the scar hidden there, where the mentors had cut into her frontal lobe. The tiny doll they had created for her writhed uneasily in her

waist purse, but Perat seemed to be thinking of something else, and missed the significance of the scar completely.

He dropped his hand. "I'm sorry," he said with a quiet weariness. "I shouldn't have asked you to kill the Terran. It was a sorry joke." Then: "Have you ever seen me before?"

"No," she whispered hoarsely. His mind was in hers, verifying the fact.

"Have you ever met my father, Phaen, the old Count of Tharn?"

"No."

"Do you have a son?"

"No."

His mind was out of hers again, and he had turned moodily back, surveying the courtyard and the dead. "Gorph will be wondering what happened to you. Come to my quarters at the eighth metron tonight."

Apparently he suspected nothing.

Father. Father. I had to do it. But we'll all join you, soon. Soon.

III

PERAT LAY ON HIS COUCH, SIPPING cold purple *terif* and following the thinly-clad dancer with narrowed eyes. Music, soft and subtle, floated from his communications box, illegally tuned to an officer's club somewhere. Evelyn made the rhythm part of her as she swayed slowly on tiptoe.

For the last thirty "nights"—the hours allotted to rest and sleep—it had been thus. By "day" she probed furtively into the minds of the office staff, memorizing area designations, channels for official messages, and the names and authorizations of occupational field crews. By night she danced for Perat, who never took his eyes from her, nor his probe from her mind. While she danced it was not too difficult to elude the probe. There was an odd autohypnosis in dancing that blotted out memory and knowledge.

"Enough for now," he ordered. "Careful of your rib."

When he had first seen the bandages on her bare chest, that first night, she had been ready with a memory of dancing on a freshly waxed floor, and of falling.

Perat seemed to be debating with himself as she sat down on her own couch to rest. He got up, unlocked his desk, and drew out a tiny reel of metal wire, which Evelyn recognized as being feed for an amateur stereop projector. He placed the reel in a projector that had been installed in the wall, flicked off the table luminar, and both of them waited in the dark, breathing rather loudly.

Suddenly the center of the room was bright with a ball of light some two feet in diameter, and inside the luminous sphere were an old man, a woman, and a little boy of about four years. They were walking through a luxurious garden, and then they stopped, looked up, and waved gaily.

Evelyn studied the trio with growing wonder. The old man and the boy were complete strangers. *But the woman—!*

"That is Phaen, my father," said Perat quietly. "He stayed at home because he hated war. And that is a path in our country estate on Tharn-R-VII. The little boy I fail to recognize, beyond a general resemblance to the Tharn line.

"But—*can you deny that you are the woman?*"

The stereop snapped off, and she sat wordless in the dark.

"There seemed to be some similarity—" she admitted. Her throat was suddenly dry. Yet, why should she be alarmed? She really didn't know the woman.

The table luminar was on now, and Perat was prowling hungrily about the room, his scar twisting his otherwise handsome face into a snarling scowl.

"Similarity! Bah! That loop of hair over her right forehead hid a scar identical to yours. I have had the individual frames analyzed!"

Evelyn's hands knotted unconsciously. She forced her body to relax, but her mind was racing. This introduced another variable to be controlled in her plan for destruction. She *must* make it a known quantity.

"Did your father send it to you?" she asked.

"The day before you arrived here. It had been en route for months, of course."

"What did he say about it?"

"He said, 'Your widow and son send



And then the cat pounced!

greetings. Be of good cheer, and accept our love.' What nonsense! He knows very well I'm not married and that—well, if I have ever fathered any children, I don't know about them."

"Is that all he said?"

"That's all, except that he included this ring." He pulled one of the duplicate jewels from his right middle finger and tossed it to her. "It's identical to the one he had made for me when I entered on my majority. For a long time it was thought that it was the only stone of its kind on all the planets of the Tharn suns, a mineralogical freak, but I guess he found another. But why should I want two of them?"

Evelyn crossed the room and returned the ring.

"Existence is so full of mysteries, isn't it?" murmured Perat. "Sometimes it seems unfortunate that we must pass through a sentient phase on our way to death. This foolish, foolish war. Maybe the old count was right."

"You could be courtmartialed for that."

"Speaking of courtmartials, I've got to attend one tonight—an appeal from a death sentence." He arose, smoothed his hair and clothes, and poured another glass of *terif*. "Some fool inquisitor can't show proper disposition of a woman prisoner."

Evelyn's heart skipped a beat. "Indeed?"

"The wretch insists that he could remember if we would just let him alone. I suppose he took a bribe. You'll find one now and then who tries for a little extra profit."

She must absolutely not be seen by the condemned inquisitor. The stimulus would almost certainly make him remember.

"I'll wait for you," she said indifferently, thrusting her arms out in a languorous yawn.

"Very well." Perat stepped to the door, then turned and looked back at her. "On the other hand, I may need a clerk. It's way after hours, and the others have gone."

Beneath a gesture of wry protest, she swallowed rapidly.

"Perhaps you'd better come," insisted Perat.

She stood up, unloosed her waist purse, checked its contents swiftly, and then followed him out.

This might be a very close thing. From the purse she took a bottle of perfume and rubbed her ear lobes casually.

"Odd smell," commented Perat, wrinkling his nose.

"Odd scent," corrected Evelyn cryptically. She was thinking about the earnest faces of the mentors as they instructed her carefully in the use of the "perfume." The adrenalin glands, they had explained, provided a useful and powerful stimulant to a man in danger. Adrenalin slowed the heart and digestion, increased the systole and blood pressure, and increased perspiration to cool the skin. But there could be too much of a good thing. An overdose of adrenalin, they had pointed out, caused almost immediate edema. The lungs filled rapidly with the serum and the victim... drowned. The perfume she possessed overstimulated, in some unknown way, the adrenals of frightened persons. It had no effect on inactive adrenals.

The question remained—who would be the more frightened, she or the condemned inquisitor?

She was perspiring freely, and the blonde hair on her arms and neck was standing stiffly when Perat opened the door for her and they entered the Zone Provost's chambers.

ONE glance at the trembling creature in the prisoner's chair reassured her. The ex-inquisitor, shorn of his insignia, shabby and stubble-bearded, sat huddled in his chair and from time to time swept his grave tormentors with glazed eyes. He looked a long while at Evelyn.

She got out her bottle of perfume idly and held it open in her warm hand. The officers and judge-provost were listening to the opening address of the prosecution and took no notice of her.

More and more frequently the condemned man turned his gaze to Evelyn. She poured a little of the scent on her handkerchief. The prisoner coughed and rubbed his chin, trying to think.

The charges were finally read, and the defense attorney began his opening statement. The prisoner, now coughing more frequently, was oblivious to all but the woman. Once she thought she saw a flicker of recognition in his eyes, and she fanned herself hurriedly with her handkerchief.

The trial droned on to a close. It was a mere formality. The prosecutor summed up by proving that a Terran woman had been captured, possibly named Evelyn Kane, turned over to the defendant for registration and disposal, and that the defendant's weekly accounts failed to show a receipt for the release of the woman. Q.E.D., the death sentence must be affirmed.

The light in the prisoner's eyes was growing clearer, despite his bronchial difficulties. He began now to pay attention to what was said and to take notice of the other faces. It was as though he had finally found the weapon he wanted, and patiently awaited an opportunity to use it.

The defense was closing. Counsel for the prisoner declared that the latter might have been the innocent victim of the escapee, Evelyn Kane, possibly a telepathic Terran woman, because only a fool would have permitted a prisoner to escape without attempting to juggle the prison records, unless his mind had been under telepathic control. They ought to be looking for Evelyn Kane now, instead of wasting time with her victim. She might be anywhere. She might even be in this building. He bowed apologetically to Evelyn,



She did not shriek when the bolt tore through her.

she smiled at the faces suddenly looking at her with new interest.

The man in the prisoner's chair was peering at Evelyn through half-closed eyes, his arms crossed on his chest. He had stopped coughing, and the fingers of his right hand were tapping patiently on his sleeve.

If Perat should at this moment probe the prisoner's mind . . .

Evelyn, in turning to smile at Perat, knocked the bottle from the table to the floor, where it broke in a liquid tinkle. She put her hands to her mouth in contrite apology. The judge-provost frowned, and Perat eyed her curiously. The prisoner was seized with such a spasm of coughing that the provost, who had stood to pronounce sentence, paused in annoyance. The wracking ceased.

The provost picked up the Faeg lying before him.

"Have you anything to say before you die?" he asked coldly.

The ex-inquisitor stood and turned a triumphant face to him. "Excellency, you ask, where is the woman prisoner who escaped from me? Well, I can tell you . . ."

He clutched wildly at his throat, coughed horribly, and bent in Evelyn Kane's direction.

"She . . ."

His lips, which were rapidly growing purple, moved without saying anything intelligible, and he suddenly crashed over the chair and to the floor.

The prison physician leaped to him, stethoscope out. After a few minutes, he stood up, puzzled and frowning, in the midst of a strained silence. "Odd, very odd," he muttered.

"Did the prisoner faint?" asked the judge-provost incuriously, lowering the Faeg.

"The prisoner's lungs are filled with liquid, apparently the result of hyperactive adrenals," commented the baffled physician. "He's dead, and don't ask me to explain why."

Evelyn smothered a series of hacking coughs in her handkerchief as the court broke up in excited groups. From the corner of her eye she saw that Perat was studying her thoughtfully.

IV

TWO WEEKS LATER, VERY late at "night", Perat lay stretched gloomily on his sleeping couch. On the other side of the room Evelyn was curled luxuriously on her own damasked lounge, her head propped high. She was scanning some of the miniature stereop reels that Perat had brought from his far-distant home planet.

"Those green trees and hedges . . . so far away," she mused. "Do you ever think about seeing them again?"

"Of late, I've been thinking about them quite a bit."

What did he mean by that?

"I understood it would be months before the field crews cut us loose from the Terran ship," she said.

"Indeed?"

"Well? Won't it?"

Perat turned his moody face toward her. "No, it won't. The field crews have been moving at breakneck speed, on account of some unfounded rumor or other that the Terran ship is going to explode. On orders from our High Command, we pull out of here by the end of the working day tomorrow. Within twenty metrons from now, our ship parts company with the enemy globe."

The scar on her forehead was throbbing violently. There was no time now to send the false orders to the field crew she had selected. She must think a bit.

"It seems then, this is our last night together."

"It is."

She rose from her couch and walked the room like a caged beast.

"You could hardly take me, a commoner, back with you . . ."

With growing shock she realized that she was more than half sincere in her request.

"It is not done. It is unlike you to suggest it."

"Well, that's that, I suppose." She stopped and toyed idly with a box of chessmen on his table. "Would you care for a game of Terran chess? I'll try to play very intelligently, so that you won't be too terribly bored."

"If you like. But there are more interesting . . ."

"Do you think," she interrupted quickly, "that you could beat me without sight of the board or pieces?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I just thought it would be more interesting for you. I'll take the board over to my bed, and you call out your moves and I'll tell you my replies. I'll see the board, but you won't."

"A curious variant."

"But you must promise to keep out of my mind; otherwise you would know my plans."

He smiled. "Set up the pieces. What color do you want?"

"I'll defend. Give me black."

She loosed her waist-purse, took a handkerchief from it, and set the purse on the deep carpet in the shadow of her table. She unfolded the chessboard in front of her on the couch and quickly placed the pieces. "I'm ready," she announced.

Indeed, everything was in readiness now except that she didn't know where the cat was. She regretted bitterly not having killed that innocent mouser weeks ago.

"Pawn to king four," announced Perat, gazing idly at the ceiling.

She made the move and replied, "Pawn to king three."

From the unlaced purse hidden on the floor a tiny head thrust itself out, followed soon by a pair of miniscule shoulders.

"Have you studied this Terran game?" queried Perat curiously, "or don't you know enough to seize the center on your first move?"

"Have I made an error already? Was that the wrong move?"

"It's the first move in a complete defensive system, but few people outside of Terrans understand it. Pawn to queen four."

She had blundered in attempting the French Defense, but it was not too late to convert to something that could be expected of a Scythian woman beginner. "Pawn to queen three."

The grey doll was out of the purse, sliding through the shadows to the door, which stood slightly ajar.

"So you don't know the book moves,

after all. You would really have astonished me if you had moved your queen pawn two squares. I'll play pawn to king bishop four. Will you have some *terif*?"

He spun around upright and reached for the decanter, looking full at the door . . . and the tiny figure.

Evelyn was up at once, cutting off his line of vision. "Yes, I think I will have one."

Telepathically she ordered the little creature to dash through the crack in the doorway. She heard the faint rustle behind her as she picked up the glass Perat poured.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "for a moment I thought I saw your little doll . . ."

She looked at him dubiously. "Really, Perat? It's in my purse."

He stepped lithely to the door and flung it open. Far down the hall there was the faintest suggestion of a scuffle.

"A mouse, I guess." He returned to his bed, but it was plain that he was unsatisfied.

THE GAME wore on for half a metron. Perat's combinations were met with almost sufficient counter-combinations, so that the issue hung in doubt for move after move.

"You've improved considerably since yesterday," he admitted grudgingly.

"Not at all. It's your playing 'blind' that makes us even. No cheating! Keep out of my mind! It isn't fair to know what I'm planning."

Oh, by the merciful god of Galaxus, if he'll stay out of mind and the cat out of the communications room for another five minutes!

"All right, all right. I'll win anyway," he muttered, as he concluded a combination that netted him the black queen. "You could gracefully resign right now."

Evelyn studied the position carefully. She had made a grave miscalculation—the queen loss had definitely not been a part of the plan. She must contrive a delaying action that would invoke an oral argument.

"Bishop to queen rook eight," she murmured. Her telepathic probe, focussed on

the bit of nervous tissue that the mentors had cut from her frontal lobe and given to her mannikin as a brain, continued its tight control. In Gorph's office, far down the wing, the little creature was hopping painstakingly from one key to another of the dispatch printing machine.

"... takes priority over all other pending projects ..."

"Your game is hopeless," scowled Perat. "I'm a queen and the exchange up on you."

"I always play the game out," replied Evelyn easily. "You never know what might happen. Your move."

"... five horizontal columns of metallic trans-scythium nine hundred xedars long will be found in a Terran storeroom, our area code ..."

"All right, then. Queen takes pawn."

"Pawn to queen knight seven," replied Evelyn. It was her sole remaining pawn, and she hoped to use it in an odd way.

Perat checked with his queen at queen bishop four, and Evelyn's king slid to safety at queen knight eight. Perat moved his rook from queen knight five to queen five.

"Do you intend to mate with rook to queen's square next move?" asked Evelyn demurely.

"under the strictest secrecy. Therefore you are ordered not to communicate ..."

"Nothing can prevent it," observed the Viscount of Tharn somberly. He had already lost all interest in the game and was contemplating the ceiling tapestries. With a lurch she brought her telepathic probe to rest, ready to prepare a false front for his searching mind. She must keep him out a moment longer, or all was lost.

"But it's my move, and I have no move," she objected, focussing her probe again.

"... signed, Perat, Viscount of Tharn, Commandant, Occupation Zone One."

Through that distant fragment of her mind she sensed that something was watching the doll with feral interest.

The cat.

"So? No move? Then you lose," replied Perat.

"But my king isn't in check. You told me yourself that when my king was not in check, and I had no legal move, that I was

stalemated, and the game was a draw."

In that other room, her telepathic contact guided the little figure down the table leg. Slowly now, don't excite the cat into pouncing. She had only seconds left, but it should suffice to place the dispatch in Gorph's incoming box. The pompous little supervisor would send it by the first jet messenger without doubt or question, and the field crew would proceed to draw the five columns.

Pain daggered into her right leg!

THE cat had seized her homunculus by the thigh; she knew the tiny bone had been crushed. She caught fleet, dizzy impressions of the animal striding off proudly with the little creature between its jaws. The letter lay where it had fallen, under the dispatch machine, almost invisible.

The doll ceased her blind writing and drew a tiny black cylinder from her belt. The cat's right eye loomed huge above her.

Mentally, Perat studied the chessboard position with growing interest.

"Idiotic Terran game," he growled. "Only a Terran would conceive of the idea of calling a crushing defeat a drawn battle. I'm sorry I taught you the game. It's really quite—*what was that?*"

"Sounded like the cat, didn't it?" responded Evelyn.

Her tiny alter ego had dropped from those destructive jaws and was dragging itself slowly back to the dispatch. It found the message and picked it up.

"Do you think something could have hurt it?" asked Evelyn.

The doll struggled toward Gorph's desk, leaving behind a thin red trail.

Then several things happened. Hot swords sizzled in Evelyn's back, and she knew the enraged feline had broken the spinal column of the doll. With throbbing intuition she collapsed her telepathic tentacle.

Too late.

Perat's probe was already in her mind, and she knew that he had caught the full impact of her swift telepathic return. She lay there limply. Her rib, now almost healed, began to ache dully.

The man continued to lie motionless, staring heavy-lidded at the ceiling. Grad-

ually, his mind withdrew itself from hers.

"So you're high-born," he mused aloud. "I should have known, but then, you concealed it very adroitly, didn't you?"

She sat up against the wall. Her heart was pounding almost audibly.

He was relentless. "No Scythian would play chess the way you did. Only a Terran would play for a draw after total defeat."

"I play chess well, so I am a Terran?" she whispered through a dry throat.

Perat turned his handsome grey eyes from the ceiling and smiled at her. His mouth lifted venomously as he watched her begin to tremble.

"Pour me a *terif*," he ordered.

She arose, feeling that she must certainly collapse the next instant. She forced her legs to move, step by step, to the table by his couch. There she picked up the *terif* decanter and tipped it to fill his glass. The dry clatter of bottle on glass betrayed her shaking hands.

"One for you, too, my dear Lyn."

She held the decanter several inches above her glass to avoid that horrible clatter, and managed to spill quite a bit on the table.

Perat held his glass up to touch hers. "A toast," he smiled, "to a mysterious and beautiful lady!"

He drank prone, she standing. She knew she would spill her drink if she tried to recross to her couch.

"So you're a Terran? Then why did you kill the Terran officer on the balcony?"

She was so relieved that she sank limply to the floor beside him.

"Why should I tell you? You wouldn't believe anything I told you now, or that you found in my mind." She smiled up at him.

"True, true. Quite a dilemma. Should I shoot you now and possibly bring the rage of a noble Scythian house down about my ears, or should I submit you to mechanical telepathic analysis?"

"I am yours, viscount," she laughed. "Shoot me. Analyze me. Whatever you wish."

She knew her gaiety was forced, and that it had struck a false note. The iron

7—Planet—Summer

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gate of doubt had clanged shut between them. From now on he would contain her mind in the mental prison of his own. The dispatch beside Gorph's desk could have no further aid from her. Anyway, the cat had undoubtedly carried off the doll.

"What a strange woman you are," he murmured. A brief shadow crossed his face. "With you, for a little while, I have been happy. But in a few metrons, of course, you will depart under close arrest for the psych center, and I'll be on my way back to the Tharn suns."

Within half a metron the office force would begin straggling into the Administration offices and her letter would be found and given to a puzzled Gorph, who would then query Perat as to whether it should not be in the incoming box for urgent matters. But what would Gorph do if his superior refused to communicate with him or anyone else for a full metron? The first messenger jet left very soon, and there was no other for four metrons. Would Gorph send it on the first jet, or would he wait? It was a chance she'd have to take.

She got up from the floor and sat down on the couch beside the Viscount of Tharn. "Perat," she began hesitantly, "I know you must send me away. I'm sorry, because I don't want to leave you so soon, and you do not want me to leave you until the last moment, either. Anything else that I would tell you, you might doubt, so I say nothing more. I would like to dance for you. When I dance, I tell the truth."

"Yes, dance, but take care of your rib," assented the man moodily.

She filled his glass again with a sure hand and replaced it on the table. Then she unloosed the combs in her hair and let it fall in a profusion of curls about her shoulders, where it scintillated in a myriad sparkling semicircles in the soft light of the table luminal.

She shook her shoulders to scatter her hair, and unhurriedly released the clasp of her outer lounging gown. The heavy robe fell about her feet, leaving her clad only in a thin, flowing undergarment, which she smoothed languidly while she kicked off her slippers. Her mouth was now half-parted, her eyelids drooping and

slumbrous. Perat was still staring at the ceiling, but she knew his mind was flowing unceasingly over her body.

"I must have music," she whispered. The man made no protest when she pressed the controls on his communications box to receive the slow and haunting dance music from the officers' club in the next zone.

The main avenue of access to Perat was now cut. And Gorph was a bolder man than she thought if he dared knock on the door of his chief while she was inside.

She began to sway and to chant. "*The Song of Karos, the Great God of Scythe, Father of Tharn folk, Dweller in Darkness . . .*"

Perat's glass halted, then proceeded slowly to his lips. Of course, no educated nobleman admitted a belief in the ancient religion of the Scythes, but how good it was to hear it sung and danced again? Not since his boyhood, when his mother had dragged him to the temple by main force . . . He placed one palm behind his head and continued to sip and to think, as this strange, lovely woman unraveled with undulant body and husky voice the long, satisfying story of his god.

As she postured sinuously, Evelyn breathed a silent prayer of thanks to the dead mentors who had crammed her to bursting with Scythe folklore.

The luminous metron dial revolved with infinite slowness.

V

ONE METRON HAD PASSED when Perat laid his empty glass on the table, without releasing it.

"Enough of dancing," he murmured with cold languor, cutting his communications box back to its authorized channel. "Come here, my dear. I wish you to kiss me."

Evelyn glided instantly to the silken couch, tossing her hair back over her shoulders and ignoring the fact that her rib was alive with pain. She knelt over the reclining man and kissed him on the mouth, running her fingers lightly down his right arm. He relinquished his glass at her touch, and she refilled it absently.

Only then did she notice that something was wrong.

His left hand was no longer beneath his head, but was concealed in the mass of cushions that overflowed his couch in a mute, glittering cascade.

Perat swirled his glass silently, apparently watching only the tiny flashes of iridescence flowing from his jeweled right hand.

Evelyn thought: What made him suspicious? There's something in his left hand. If I only dared probe . . . But he'd know I was afraid, and I'm not supposed to be afraid. Anyway, in a little while it won't matter. If the field crew has started pulling the columns, they should be through in half a metron. If they haven't started, they never will, and nothing will matter then, anyway.

The man's face was inscrutable when he finally spoke. "You couldn't have gone on much longer, anyway, on account of your rib."

"It was becoming a little painful."

"Twice you nearly fainted."

So he had noticed that.

He continued mercilessly. "Why were you so anxious to keep me shut up for a whole metron?"

"I wanted to amuse you. We have so little time left, now."

"So I thought, until your rib began to trouble you. The reaction of an ordinary woman would have been to stop."

"Am I an ordinary woman?"

"Decidedly not. That's why the situation has become so interesting."

"I don't understand, Perat." She sat down beside him, forcing him to move his legs so that his left hand was jammed under the cushion.

"A little while ago, I decided to contact Gorph's mind." He took a sip. "It seems he had been trying to reach me through the communications box."

"He had?" She pictured Gorph's old-womanish anxiety. He had found the sealed message, then, but hadn't been able to verify it because his chief had been listening to a tale of gods. Had he or had he not sent the message by the early jet? It had to be! Possibly all five of



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the columns had been drawn by now, but she couldn't assume it. The strain-pile would not erupt for a full Terran hour after the fifth column has been drawn. From now until death, of one sort or another, she must delay, delay, delay.

Her blue eyes were widely innocent, and puzzled, but the nerves of her arms were going dead with over-tension. Perhaps if she threw the *terif* in his eyes with her left hand and crushed the numbing supraclavicular nerve with her thumb . . .

Perat turned his head for the first time and looked her full in the face.

"Gorph says he sent the message," he said tonelessly.

She looked at him blankly, then casually removed her hand from his knee and dropped it in her lap. He must absolutely not be alarmed until she knew more. "Apparently I'm supposed to know what you're talking about."

He turned back to the ceiling. "Gorph says someone prepared a priority dispatch with my signature, and he sent it out. I don't suppose you have any idea who did it?"

Time! Time!

"When I was Gorph's assistant, there was a young officer—I can't remember his name—who sometimes forged your signature to urgent actions when Gorph was out. This is true, Perat. My mind is open to you."

He fastened his luminous grey eyes on her. "I presume you're lying, but . . ." His mental probe skimmed rapidly over her cortical association centers. Her skill was strained to the utmost, setting up false memories of each of thousands of synaptic groups just ahead of Perat's probe. On some of the groups she knew she had made blunders, but apparently she preserved the general impression by strengthened verification in subsequent nets. She wove a brief tale of a young officer in charge of metals salvage who had sent an order to a field group to recover some sort of metal, and since Gorph had been out, and H.Q. needed the metal urgently, the officer did not wait for official authorization. His probe then searched her visual lobe thoroughly, but with growing skepticism. She offered him only indistinct

memories of the dead officer's identity.

"Who was the man?" asked Perat as a matter of form, sipping his *terif* absently.

"Sub-leader Galen, I think." That would give him pause. He knew she had offered no visual memory of Galen. He would wonder why she was lying.

"Are you sure?"

SHE wanted to look at the time-dial on the wall, but dared not. From the corner of her eye she saw Perat's left arm tense, then relax warily. His mental probe had fastened grimly to her mind again, though he must know it would be effort wasted. She conjured up an image of Sub-leader Galen in the act of telling her he was handling a very urgent matter and that he'd tell the Viscount later what he'd done. Then the face of the young officer changed to another of the staff, then another, then still another. Then back to Galen.

"No, I'm not sure."

Perat smiled thinly. "You wished to gain time, and I wished to idle it away. I suppose we have both been fairly successful."

The communications box beside the bed jangled.

"Yes?" cried Perat, all alert.

As his mouth was forming the word, his probe was collapsing within her mind, and her own flashed briefly into his mind. The hand under the pillow held a Faeg, aimed at her chest. But the safety catch was still on.

"Excellency?" came Gorph's tinny voice.

"Yes, Gorph? Have you replaced the columns?"

"Replaced" . . . ? That seemed to indicate that the field crew had followed her forged order, then returned the columns by Perat's countercommand, relayed telepathically through Gorph. But once all the great rods were drawn, replacing them did not halt the strain pile. The negative potential would keep on increasing geometrically with time, as planned, to the final goal of joint catastrophe and stalemate.

Some sort of knowledge was drumming silently at her threshold of consciousness. Something she couldn't quite grasp. About

the woman in the stereop? Possibly. It would come to her soon.

Ignoring Perat's gloating smile, she looked casually at the metron dial, and her heart leaped with elation, for the dial had ceased revolving. Electrons must be flowing from the center of the ship through the walls, outward toward the surface two thousand miles away, and the massive currents were probably jamming all the wall circuits.

Within minutes, *finis*.

Could she really rest, now? She was beginning to feel very tired, almost sleepy. Her duty had been done, and nothing could ever be important again.

Gorph was answering his master over the speaker: "Yes, your excellency, we got them back, that is to say, excepting that one of the five is only half-way out of its cradle."

Life was good, life was beautiful. She almost yawned. Most certainly all of the columns had been pulled out, and then four had been replaced and something had broken down with the fifth. But they had all been out, and that was the only thing that mattered.

"What happened, Gorph?" asked Perat, sipping at his *terif* again. His eyes were fastened on his mistress.

She knew that he had pulled the safety catch on the Faeg.

"When the crew took the rods out, the prime mover broke down on the fifth one, when it was only half-way out. They brought in another mover and got the other four rods back in, and now they're trying to repair the first mover and push the fifth rod back."

(The fifth rod had not been completely drawn. Oh Almighty Heaven!)

"Very well, Gorph. I need not repeat that none of the rods are to be moved out again, unless I appear to you personally. I'll talk to you later."

The box went dead.

Perat, now taking no notice of Evelyn, finished his *terif* leisurely. She sat at his side, breathing woodenly. She had done all that she could do. All five rods had not been withdrawn, and they never would be, now.

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"If all Terran women are like you," he began slowly, "I cannot understand how you Terrans lost this battle." He did not expect an answer, and did not wait for one. His hard eyes seemed softened somewhat by a curious admiration. "Only your own gods know what you have endured in your attempt to start the pile."

She looked up wretchedly.

He went on: "Yes, we learned in the nick of time, didn't we? Our physicists told Gorph that the great rods were the core of a pile that could have converted both ships into pure energy, with not a shred of matter left over—something that all the fission piles in the two galaxies couldn't do. It seems that the pile, if activated, would have introduced sufficient energy into the low-packing-fraction atoms, from iron on down to helium, to transform them completely from matter into radiation.

"Unpleasant thought! Now the Scythian plan will be modified slightly. We shall wait until we tear our globe away from yours, far away, and then prime movers left behind in your ship here can pull the columns again, all five, this time. Our globe then proceeds into the Terran Confederacy, and the war will be over. But of course, you'll know nothing about that."

He regarded her wearily. "I'm sorry Lyn—or is it 'Evelyn Kane'? If you had been of Tharn-blood, or even of the Scythian federation, I would have married you."

She listened to him with only half a mind. Some strange, inaudible thing was trying to reach her. Something she couldn't grasp, but ought to grasp. What had the mentors told her to be ready for? Exhaustion lay like a paralyzing blanket over her inert mind.

"You killed your countryman that day," he intoned, "just to ingratiate yourself with me. He was very generous to you. When he saw that you wouldn't shoot him with his eyes open, he closed them. Who was he?"

"Gordon, Lord Kane. My father."

The *terif* glass shook, and the man's face became perceptibly paler. He breathed stridently for a while before speaking again.

This time he seemed to be calling with

earnest finality to the forbidding deity of his own warlike homeland, announcing a newcomer at the dark portals of the god: "*This woman . . . !*"

EVELYN KANE did not shriek when the Faeg-bolt tore through her rib and lungs. Even when she sank to the floor, the pain-lines in her own face were much better controlled than those in Perat's.

Then as she lay quietly on the thick, gilded carpet, with consciousness rapidly fading and returning with the regularity of her heart beats, she realized what had been calling to her. The piezo crystal in her waist pouch, still hidden in the shadows of her table, had been activated, and had brought into focus within the room the dim, transparent outlines of a small space ship.

Perat saw it too, and his eyes widened as they traced it quickly from wall to wall.

"It's real . . ." whispered Evelyn between clenched lips. "Mentors wanted me . . . return in it . . . to Terra . . . secret of pile . . ."

A strange light was growing over Perat's face. "Of course! So that's why your father tried so hard at the last to break through our blockade and get a ship through! If the secret of the strain-pile had ever reached Terra, all the Tharn suns—indeed, the whole Scythe federation—would be novae by now! By Karos, it was a narrow thing!"

There was a soft gurgling in Evelyn's throat.

He flung his pistol away and sat down beside her, lifting her head to his chest. "I'll call the physician," he rasped through contorted lips.

She slid a cold palm over his hot cheek, caressing it lightly. "No . . . we die . . ."

He stiffened. "*We?*"

She continued to stroke his cheek dreamily. "Die with you . . ."

He shook her. "What are you talking about!" he cried. "The pile isn't going to erupt!"

"Crystal focusses . . . ship . . . only when pile . . ."

His face blanched.

She whispered again, so softly that he had to bend his ear to her lips. "You escape . . . get in ship . . ."

He stared at her incredulously. "You'd let me get away with the pile secret!"

She relaxed in his arms, smiling sleepily, while the tiny red trickle from the corner of her mouth grew wider. "Stupid of me."

She shivered. "... cold . . ."

The Viscount of the Tharn Suns, the greatest star-cluster in the Scythe federation, knotted his jaw muscles feverishly and gnawed at his lower lip. Somehow or other the strain-pile had been energized. Probably the terrific proton storm that had hidden both ships for years had compensated for the unrealized potential of the undrawn fifth rod. It was his duty to the federation to throw this woman to the floor and take refuge between the shadowy, shimmering walls of the escape ship. He must carry the secret of the pile to safety with him. He had only seconds.

He looked down distractedly at the small creature who was destroying the proud ships that two great civilizations had spent a generation in building. She seemed to be in a deep, peaceful sleep. The only sign of life was a faint pulse in her throat.

She was the only woman that he had ever found whose companionship he could have . . . enjoyed hour after hour. He almost thought, "could have loved."

The room was growing quite warm. The tremendous currents coursing through the walls were swiftly growing stronger.

Another thought occurred to him: How had those Terran mentors planned for their escape ship to avoid the holocaust? Any matter within millions of miles would be destroyed. It was evident, then, that wherever the ship was, it was *not* within the danger zone.

Suddenly he understood everything.

With a queer smile, in which ribald surmise and tenderness fought for supremacy, he picked the woman up, carried her into the phantom vessel, placed her on the pilot's lounge, and strapped her in. From his waist-pouch he took a hypodermic syringe, removed the sheath from the

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needle, and thrust it into her arm. Her face twinged briefly, but she did not waken. He threw a blanket over her and then strode quickly to the controls. They were fairly simple, and he had no difficulty in switching the automatic drive to the general direction of the Tharn sun cluster. He wrote a hasty note on the pilot's navigation pad, and then turned again to the woman. He removed one of his duplicate jeweled rings and slipped it on her finger. His father would recognize it and would believe her.

Then he bent over her and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"Perhaps I love you too, my dearest enemy," he whispered gently. "Educate our son-to-be in the ways of peace."

Again outside the ship, he spun the space lock that sealed her in. The ship's walls were now growing opaque and he could no longer see inside.

His communications box was jangling furiously in a dozen different keys, and anxious, querulous voices were pouring through it into the room. He snapped it off, loosened his collar, filled his glass to overflowing with the last of the *terif*, and cut off the table luminaire. His stereop projector next had his attention.

He lay on his couch in the darkness of his death cell, studying with the keenest satisfaction his wife, son, and father, while they waved at him happily from the radiant stereop sphere.

Those Terran mentors had planned well. The escape ship would not be affected by the nearing catclysm, because it was really in a different time plane—at least five years in the past. The catastrophe would simply release it to its original continuum, whence it would proceed with its precious cargo to the Tharn suns.

Odd effect, that time shift. He wished now he'd read more of the theories of that

ancient Terran, Einstein, who claimed that simultaneity was an illusion—that "now" here could be altogether different from "now" in other steric areas. His son, unborn as yet "here," was more than four years old "there"—on the planet. Tharn-R-VII, where the lad played in his grandfather's gardens.

And then there was the mystery of the rings. The old count had not had another ring made of course. The ring the count had sent with the stereop coils must have been the same one that Perat had just placed on the finger of his bride. The ring sent with the stereops was merely his original ring brought back in the relooping of a time-line. In his "now" there was only one ring—the one he was wearing. In Evelyn's "now" there was the same ring, but that was logical, because her "now" would soon be five years earlier than his. Owing to this five-year relooping of time, it had been possible for the ring to exist in duplicate for six weeks. But very soon, in his "now," it would be destroyed for good.

He pressed the repeat button on the stereop and started the coil again. The boy had an engaging grin, rather like his own (he would indulge a final vanity), but without the scar. He hoped there would never be another war to disfigure or kill his son. It was up to the next generation.

As he swirled his *terif*, he smiled and thought of the note he had left on the pilot's pad: *Name him after your father—Gordon.*

* * * * *

"... failed to find any survivors, or for that matter, any trace whatever of either globe, if one excepts the supernova that appeared for a quarter metron some thirty years ago at the far margin of the proton storm. We of the Armistice Commission therefore unanimously urge that further hostilities by either side would necessarily be indecisive . . ."

—Scythe-Terran Armistice, History and Tentative Provisions (excerpts): Gordon of Tharn, Editor-in-Chief and Primary Scythian Delegate.

(Continued from page 2)

accepted costumes which left female breasts fully exposed and yet have not lapsed into unbridled lewdness. Many civilizations have experimented, some quite successfully, with premarital and extra-marital sexual freedom.

And, if our own civilization doesn't radioactivate itself into oblivion or sterility, increasing biological knowledge will surely give us complete control of reproduction. Children will be born only when they are definitely desired. That too will alter the social patterns.

Sex will probably remain one of the basic human drives as long as *homo sapiens* is recognizable as such. So let's quit trying to hide that fact beneath a mound of taboos. Whether the authors see the future patterns as puritanism or libertinism, monogamy or polygamy or polyandry or eugenic mating controlled by bureaucrats, that makes little difference. To each author his own dreams. But a writer can't very well depict the social structure of a hypothetical future world without including man-woman relationships—and in these sex will be a basic factor.

So I contend that discussions of sex have just as legitimate a place in science-fiction as nuclear physics and military technology and synthetic foods and the eternal struggle of dictatorship vs. freedom. If science-fiction can persuade people to look openmindedly at themselves and their emotion-dominated attitudes, it can do us all a great service.

So let's start jettisoning the taboos!

Sincerely,

JOHN HIGGINS

BE NOT AFREUD

418 High St.,
Closter, N. J.

DEAR EDITOR (wow! What a terrific beginning, eh?):

This fellow came staggering into my office the other day, and seeing that his shoes were on backwards and that he wore his wrist watch around his neck, I knew he was not quite normal. His eyes glared, his mouth hung slack, and he muttered over and over, "Eternal Zemmud Must Die!" A sad case.

"Doctor, you've gotta help me," he sobbed, grabbing me by the sleeve. "I'm in a terrible condition."

"First give me back my sleeve," I said. "Thank you. Now lie down on that couch and tell me all about it."

"I don't know where to begin," he faltered.

"I'll give you a choice," I cooed. "The beginning, the middle or the ending."

"Well, it started the day the Germans won the war . . . to escape them, I threw myself into the future. I woke up in the body of Space Patrol Agent Miram Muscle. As Miram Muscle, I made the first trip to the moon and found living there—"

"Yes?" I asked.

"I can't go on! I can't!"

I soothed him with a baseball bat, and he resumed.

"I found there . . . HER!"

He paused. I could see he was thinking of HER. Whoever HER was.

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Three days later, he looked up and resumed his tale.

"She was lovely," he said. "Draped only in a thin sheet of bubble gum tha, clung to her lovely young figure, her beauty was like that of a herd of catapillars in the moonlight."

"Sounds lovely," I prompted.

"She was," he agreed. His face grew dark aqua-marine. "But Oscar was her lover! Oscar, that blob of bobbly blob! Maddened, I leaped into my ship, the *Segwnvtyuostrevat* 1452089¼. But that good vessel had fallen in love with the sun, and was speeding there with unbelievable velocity! Was I, Miram Muscle, doomed? Oh, horrors upon horrors upon horrors upon horrors! GAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

"What happened?"

"I crashed. On the mucky slime of that gooey world, Venus. And there I found it!"

He leaped to his feet, his white face flushed with raging madness!

"Eternal Zemm Must Die!" he shrieked. Then he collapsed on the couch. I revived him.

"And now," he continued, his head in his hands, "I don't know . . . I can't go on."

"Please. What's worrying you?"

"I don't know whether I'm a man or a robot!" he said, placing his head on his lap.

This fellow was mad! I stared at him thoughtfully. Probably something so sad had happened to him that he had gone nuts so he couldn't remember it. I went over to him.

"Listen," I said. Then, "Dwellers In Silence, by Ray Bradbury!"

He screamed. Again and again. Then, before I could stop him, he leaped from my window to the river below. A huge Zemm came up and ate the poor man with one gulp.

But he'd left something behind—on the floor of my office. I bent over and picked it up.

It was a magazine. I read it. It was called **PLANET STORIES**. (Surprised?).

I don't know what to do. Am I a man or a robot? **ETERNAL ZEMM MUST DIE!** Miram Muscle, Space Patrol Agent—am I doomed to die, plunging into the sun, just because of my ship? It really doesn't love the sun. Oscar! No, no GAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!

Yours truly,

DAVID M. CAMPBELL

SAYS STF IS IMMATURE

6023 Woodlawn Ave.
Chicago 37, Ill.

DEAR EDITOR:

Greetings and salutations from a new convert to the ranks of Science-Fiction fans! I find this field fascinating in a number of ways, and have spent the last few weeks devouring as much of the recent material as I could lay my hands on. I have found **PLANET** to be definitely above average in story material. If you will allow me, I would like to get off my chest a few matters which have caught my attention.

First of all, it seems to me that the great value of Science-Fiction lies in its capacity to enlarge vision, to encourage thinking in terms of sweeping concepts and broad vistas of time and space, to enable the reader to get some kind of grasp on the ever-elusive realms of Time to Come. In short, STF, contrary to the opinion of some, does not

make ideal "escape" literature. No fan, while reading a **PLANET** story, can help pondering—be it ever so fleetingly—on the possibilities or probabilities presented to view in that writer's particular vision of the future. STF therefore must assume a certain responsibility toward the world of the present if that function is not to be mis-carried.

The question then is this: Has Science-Fiction, at this stage of its development, succeeded in living up to its responsibility? Here I will assume that the current crop is reasonably representative of modern STF.

And it is apparent that many fans and many writers have continued somehow to nurse a great reluctance to accept and adapt their thinking to facts and principles of social science which have long since been demonstrated and established. No writer of STF who described the lush vegetation on the Moon in the year 1955, without chronicling some tremendous upheaval in the nature of things before that time, could hope to survive the howls of outraged fans; yet I have seen the same fans, in the *Vizigraph* and elsewhere, use arguments in support of certain social prejudices which are distressingly pseudo-scientific, distressingly at variance with known and established fact—arguments of precisely the type which are heartily scotched during the first class session of any reputable introductory university course in anthropology or sociology. This inconsistency can, perhaps, be attributed to ignorance; but it is none the less damnable in a field of literature which, calling itself "scientifiction," runs the risk of promoting blatantly unscientific attitudes in its excursions into various possible social orders of the future.

The evidence for the immaturity of modern STF is closely related to that for its inconsistency, and shows itself in a perhaps unconscious catering to national and racial chauvinism. It is a scientifically demonstrable fact that the Earth is cooling; it is also a scientifically demonstrable fact that, for all the purposes of Man, the Earth is shrinking—and the latter process is by far the more rapid one.

Trends of history reveal other significant truths—such as the fact that the era of passionate nationalism, spurred on at present by the excesses and failings of a blind and selfish USA and of an equally blind and selfish USSR, is rapidly nearing the end of its days; or that the conditions under which any group of men could be exploited or even despised for the sole advantage of another group, without fear of harmful consequences, have passed from Man's world. Slowly but surely, the consciousness of the world is awakening to the principle that the future of mankind is best served only when each and every human being is given the maximum opportunity to develop his individual capacity for making constructive contributions to the advancement and welfare of himself and his fellow-men.

What has all this got to do with STF and its immaturity? Well, in the modern STF of this country many stories are placed centuries in the future—and the hero is almost invariably American, nearly always Anglo-Saxon! This, of course, is no sin in itself—after all, the literature under consideration is American, with a substantially Anglo-Saxon audience—and is perhaps to be taken for granted. But this is where STF must realize that it is not mere fantasy, that it deals

PLANET. Ah hah! Here was the means for my escape. Waiting until an open manhole was about to pass over-head, I reached for the moldy mass with my asbestos gloves. Turning to page 118 I quickly tore out the pages headed The Vizigraph and pushed them under the water. Immediately the air cleared and PLANET regained its luster. As it started to rise, I, with a firm grip on it, rose also. When I reached the street level, I let go, dropped to the ground, and turned around to watch PLANET soar into the heavens.

The moral of the story is . . . Well, guess.

No. It isn't wrong to allow both sides to air their views. It is wrong however to allow any side to speak. What happen to the old-fashioned letters dealing with stiction?

The three best letters? Oberfield, Nelson, and Bradley (couldn't figure out what he was talking about but it sounded important).

The cover was ginger-peachy except for the tilted yellow block. Why blot out the whole picture? Smaller blurbs would work just as well.

Eternal Zemmd Must Die! was satisfactory. The heading was masterful.

Hostage of Tomorrow had a surprise ending. I thought it was going to be good but it surprised me. Did Abernathy run into deadline trouble? Too quick resolution.

Rumortary was a new twist on a weird tale from * * * * (Tst! Competitor!—Ed.)

Moon of Madness. What's this? Another weird tale. The Bradbury influence is getting greater.

And here he is now. After reading a great number of Ray's stories I thought I could diagnose the end. I took my beating like a man and bawled after guessing wrong. From now on I'll let the stories run their course without further divination. *Dwellers in Silence* was superb. Ray's the reason I started reading PLANET.

The Star Beast and Animal were above average while *Lady Into Hell-Cat* was typical b-and-t.

In keeping with the seasons it looks like you are having May in Spring (Mayan Spring). Get it? Oh, you don't want it. Okay.

Sincerely,

ROBERT A. RIVENES

OK, NO MORE AMERICAN HEROES

Box 1723
Fargo, N. D.

DEAR EDITOR:

I've been reading PLANET for some time without ever having written in before, and why the spring issue should inspire me to do so, I don't know. Certainly not because of its quality; the best item to appear was Radell Nelson's letter. The only story I cared for was *Lady Into Hell-Cat*, and I'm not sure what I liked about it. Not the ending, at any rate. I was hoping that the conclusion would feature Ria clawing Heydrick's eyes out, or shooting him or something. I may be old-fashioned, but when a guy drags a woman clear across the solar system to have her killed, and spends his time en route beating her up, I can't see that he rates a hearts-and-flowers finale.

Most of your correspondents seem to be Bradbury enthusiasts, but I am not. Nobody has more admiration than I for Bradbury's weirds and gruesome murder thrillers, but not his STF. Science is essentially materialistic, prosaic, and meticulous, and Bradbury's talent essentially be-

longs to the field of pure imagination. He tries hard to amalgamate the two, but it can't be done. To couple the word "fiction" with science does not remove this basic incompatibility. True, his stories are well above pulp average. From anyone else they would be excellent. But not from the author of *The Jar*, *The Small Assassin*, and *Homecoming*.

Care for another slant on your race controversy? It is this: I am surprised that the race issue didn't split fandom long ago. No source has been more active in perpetuating the clichés of the racists than the STF pulps.

In the average interplanetary yarn, the hero is an Earthman, white, with an Anglo-Saxon or Irish name and speech traits plainly stamping him an American. The villain, unless he is the stereotyped Slav or Latin of the gangster stories, is a member of a non-Terrestrial race. The treatment of these races as a whole follow the two standard viewpoints of the bigot: they are crafty, dangerous, highly productive of criminals and degenerates, given to wiping out camps of explorers from Earth and, when properly conquered by the Terrestrials, to attempting to overthrow their rightful lords by force and violence; or they are primitive, docile, a bit servile, useful as workers, and likeable as long as they keep in their place. Some authors justify this blend of Kiplingesque imperialism and Dixonesque racism by making the alien races completely inhuman and repulsive by our standards; but even those authors who are willing to grant the existence of human life on Mars in order to leave the way open to the final clinch, would never grant even a human Martian a lead role in the story (*We have one coming up*.—Ed.). Similarly, now and then you get a cruel Terrestrial governor-general of Venus, who oppresses the Venusians beyond the call of duty and in the end receives a proper comeuppance, but the right of Earth to have governors-general on Venus is never questioned.

During the war we were deluged with stories about brutal Jovian Krauts and treacherous Mercurians obviously patterned after the Japanese. That was to be expected. Already STF writers with no better ideas are beginning to discover on the outer planets races of savage bearded androids who maintain communist systems complete with iron curtains. We trust the editors to prevent that from becoming a trend, for the sake of international good will, if nothing else. But, as long as the race issue figures so strongly in the stories, the fans can be expected to come out with it once in a while.

RAY H. RAMSAY

HOTSY-DANDY, WITH RED EYES

1431 2nd Avenue, S. E.,
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

DEAR EDITOR:

I shall make this as brief as my inflated ego will permit. (I like to imagine a two page epistle all by me in print.)

The magazine was really a hotsty-dandy. It started out with a perfect cover and never left that standing all the way through. It was an example you should set more often. Ah, yes, it's proud that you should be to have edited such a masterpiece.

The stories were all swell. The *Zemmd morsel* was perfect. Such mastery of style and plotting!

Hasse should try the longer epics more often, this boy is really talented, once he lets himself go. Thank you, thank you, thank you, for this wonderful story.

After that, in a very equal tie, were *Hostage of Tomorrow* and *Animat*. They were both good as they could be. Both novel ideas, too.

I liked *Moon of Madness* an awful lot. It sort of reminded me of the good immortal days of Peacock. (No offense there, PLP, for you've given us things to surpass Peacock's most elaborate dreams.) (Cheese—tanks—Ed.)

The style of it alone is the only thing that held *Dwellers in Silence* together. Really, Brad, old red-eyes, the plot was something terrible. It held up like last year's spinach.

Runaway, *Lady Into Hell-Cat*, and *The Star Beast* all were pretty good, too. In fact, there wasn't a yarn in the whole book that one couldn't say he enjoyed after he read them.

And now, says the suave, sophisticated reader rubbing well-manicured hands together, for the Vizigraph. The Paul Cox feud has gained enough speed already without my adding to it. All I will say is that Mr. Cox, in his bluntly-aimed aversions, preached the exact opposite of what he should have been taught. I trust he sees by this time that his place in fandom is now dissolved because of this.

Give the first pic to Charles Henderson; he was on the ball. Let Leland Sapiro have second for his haughty rebuttal to Cox, and give third to Bob Bradley.

I must leave the sacred dwelling of PLANET now, oh Master Payne, but fear not, for I shall return!

Fancercly,

MARVIN WILLIAMS

WON'T VOTE FOR HIMSELF

4 Spring Street,
Lubec, Maine

DEAR EDITOR:

Good ole PLANET has come out once again and once again I'm going to subject you to a letter commenting on said PS. No objections, I hope.

Gad, that girl on the cover certainly has a big veil on her ha . . . hmmm, no hat. Oh, well, nice cover. Keep Anderson!

Nice to see Henry Hasse back in PLANET. A pretty good story, too—only that blurb on the cover certainly didn't apply to any yarn in this issue of PS! I notice that this one is faintly related to his previous stories about Aladdian, some of which were co-authored by Albert de Pina. WHERE IS DE PINA?? HUH??

Say, Coppel really had a nice yarn in *Runaway!* Good.

Moon of Madness was, to be frank (altho I'm really Ed), was (oops, repeating myself) louseeeeeeee. This awful thing after his excellent *Mutiny on Venus* an issue or so ago? Tsk, tsk.

Dwellers in Silence was very good. Better than he's been doing lately. But I wish Brad would switch to Venus or anywhere to get away from Mars for a while!

The Star Beast was darned good! Knight should appear more often. Whatever you do, don't unlock his shackles, even for a minute!

Stan Mullen by *Lady Into Hell-Cat* was very good. (Well, that was all I could do after start-



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ing out wrong, you know!) I hope Mullen has more in future issues. Will he?

Animat by Basil Wells. Pretty good but I'll bet a stack of *PLANET STORIES* that you cut hunks out of it! Seems disjointed.

Hostage of Tomorrow is the first good story by Abernathy to appear in PS. He did good this time but the ending was a little weak. Don't say it wasn't!

Now to march bravely into the *VIZIGRAPH*. But to join in the fight? Nope. Chad's Dad took care of things pretty well as did many of the others. I think it's about time this got dropped and let die out. Or fight it out in the fanzines. Anyway, Paul Cox wants to let it die or so he said in a fanzine.

Ray Nelson gets number one spot for a good hunk of letter-hacking (and he's my friend anyway). Gee, this is hard. Who'll get 2 and 3? Why don't I write a good letter some time, and then I'll vote for me! (Honest Ed they call me.) John King gets the #2 spot and the Olivers get #3 for clamping down on the Big Controversy now raging thru the Vizi.

Leland Sapiro gets honorable mention for his letter. But I wonder what's eating Bradley? He is certainly mad at Brackett! Speaking of Brackett, how about having her do a story soon huh? Don't tell me you let her escape! While I'm at it, how about having some of those off-trail tales that used to grace PS's pages? Remember them? And what's happened to the Feature Flash? And when are you gonna get PS going bi-monthly?! And . . . oh, stop tearing your hair! What's wrong with a few innocent questions?

Well, I just gotta go now (as much as I hate to) so get busy doing something about those questions I ask! Willya?

STFanatically,

Ed Cox

OFF TO GRUMPH ALPHA!

1611 Ferry Street,
Lafayette, Ind.

DEAR EDITOR:

It is with sadness I note that our beloved *Vizigraph* has become a veritable battleground. Fully half of the letters therein deal with the problem of racial superiority and/or inferiority . . . Leave us drop the subject right now from the *Vizi*. (Amen—Ed.)

Turning next to the cover, I must admit that the FEM is superb, marvelous, etc., her legs in particular revealing Anderson's technical skill, BUT THE REST OF THE PICTURE IS LOUSY!!!!!! Do you hear? LOUSY!!! It is also crude in the extreme.

Going on to the stories, I find *EZMD* by Hasse well written space opera, quite interesting, but still hack. Why won't Hasse end his stories like Bradbury? Have Curt turn Loraine in to the police, or get killed by the Energons, or something. But no! In PS, when boy meets girl in 97.5 cases out of 100 she gets him.

Runaway was, get this, mediocre. The writing was poor. No further comment.

Moon of Madness, ditto, ditto, ditto.

Dwellers In Silence by Bradbury was EXCELLENT, yet I rate it only second place because good though it was—

The Star Beast was better, better, can your

sluggish wits(?) grasp the fact? Mr. Damon Knight is rapidly becoming one of the foremost authors contributing to PS! His story was the best in the issue. Happy days! Now you have two authors who can write.

Lady Into Hellcat by Stanley Mullen, very good. Only one criticism to make, Lee Heydrick's first name should have been Rinehard, more Germanic you know, and perfectly suited for a police officer.

Animat by Basil Wells, was not too good, particularly as the plot was stale, (Making it 97.501 cases out of 100). N. F. C.

Hostage Of Tomorrow by Robert Abernathy I did not like. It presupposes a paradox of the first order. Stated briefly it is this: Hero gets into time machine and goes to Grumph Alpha, A.D. 2345. He doesn't like it at all, so he heads back to 19XX when there was still hope, and shifts the destiny of the human race onto the time track for Grumph Beta. Since he has been to Grumph Alpha it must obviously still exist, on a separate time track. Since the destiny pattern for Grumph Beta must have existed all the time, all our hero has done is to laboriously shift himself from pattern A to pattern B, changing both patterns slightly to produce patterns Aa, Ab, Ba, and Bb which have always had potential existence. See?

Going back to the *Vizi* for a moment, I vote pictures to R. F. Nelson, Bill Oberfield, and R. A. Bradley. Those other guys play too rough. Why not get them to start a discussion on a nice harmless subject like ESP, or something?

Yours truly,

A. A. GILLILAND

HIDES US FROM HUBBY

Apt. #201

Veterans Village
Canton, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

Your latest *PLANET*, Spring, has just been received and contents noted. No one but my husband even suspects that this item is in my possession. I have it well camouflaged among the preceding two or three years' issues. My best friends shall never get a peep at it—that is, until I have finished re-reading the *Vizi*. I do not give the code-key to the *Vizi* to just everybody. Too many of my neighbors have discovered a counter-code, which they phrase, quote, So What? end quote. This remark has me up on my high horse and down in the dumps. As a future member of the South-Side-of-the-Tracks Department of State, I am forced to formulate a policy. Praise and/or constructive criticism only. Merciful silence for the hopeless.

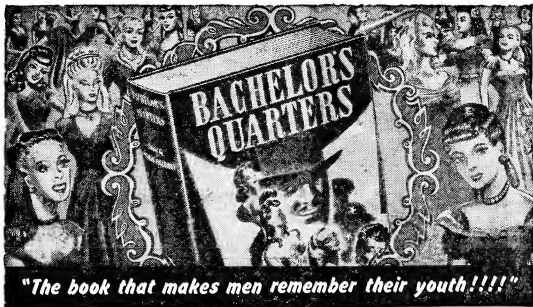
Zemmd—space jarg and perils and jumping to and fro with blasters and eyes like blazing pools of hate for them as likes big-game hunting.

Hostage—the GI's jump through the years, taking command of situations right and left, outsmarting the dirty villains and leap back to go on doing it in some other time. Just peachy if you aren't getting enough exercise.

Runaway—this round of shudders (mild shudders) is for those who like to 'cringe just a wee at the notion of powerful alien life.

Moon of Madness—the ugly tale of degradation for those who wish to wallow in moon-gore.

Dwellers in Silence—A dash of loneliness for



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those who like unloneliness (including me). I don't know where Ray keeps finding his gentle, sympathetic space crews, but this yarn gives a clue. A gem, like most of his stories.

The Star Beast and Hell-Cat—Silence.

Animat—The de-robotizing of Jay Forsix was a clever idea—wish the conclusion had been fresher and the story long enough to work out the idea.

Vizigraph—Ah! Meat! A fight to Nelson, who really reads and who can spot the inconsistencies which detract from my favorite reading and therefore maybe help improve the quality, getting me more for my money, which would be swell. A second to Cox. Anybody who does that much work should at least get a second for it, even if I don't agree entirely with his choices. A third, on a whim, to Henderson, just because he chose to talk about Tenn's *Brooklyn Project*, which I consider the last and only word on the subject of time travel, the only story to deal reasonably with the old paradox of the return—and the ending was fine writing with the leaving out of everything you could reason out for yourself.

I don't mean to ignore the current (and of the centuries) issue of super-races, though I would rather see the issue appear in fiction, which might illuminate the problem more effectively than haranguing letters. I even have to get in my own quarter-credit's worth. I must confess that I don't quite see what a super-race is going to spend its time doing besides just sitting around dominating (a dangerous procedure, according to

Toynbee). Who wants to be superman anyhow when you can have so much fun just being folks? My view of the destiny and evolution of man seems to include a growing consciousness of people as individuals (maybe even animals—consider Eckstein's *Everyday Miracle* and Lofting's beloved fantasy *Doctor Dolittle*). Chad and his dad and Proctor are certainly reasonable; but reason is handmaid to motivation. Perhaps I am so willing to accept their reasoning because nobody I can identify with a pure race (next to impossible anyhow) is viciously interfering with my work or my fun, and this work and fun are being made subtler and more interesting by a number of people whose "race" is not immediately identifiable as "super."

ELIZABETH CURTIS

WHAT? NO MORE EGO BOO?

Great Village, N.S.,
Canada

DEAR EDITOR:

I may be one in ten thousand, but I do not think so—when I write to you and say that I think the Vizigraph a useless waste of good space in the magazine that might be utilized by printing another story.

What do I care what Mr. Critic(?) thinks of the stories? Not one whit. If I don't like a story, I can pass it by and go on to something else. Of course, I have my preferences, but why should I inflict them on all your readers? It would be perfectly all right for me to write to the Editor which stories I liked best, as by the readers doing so the Editor is, I presume, guided in his selection of future stories. But why make it public?

As far as I can see, the Vizigraph is controlled by a few rabid fans who call each other anything but ladies and gentlemen, all in a spirit of fun, I presume, but which with the slang and misspelled words is not funny to me at all, but rather nauseating.

Furthermore, they hold some of the writers up to ridicule, which, however much they do not like their stories, is not sporting or fair play. No doubt these writers have given their best, and I think the fans, in decency, should write to the Editor privately.

You would say, probably, that these public letters are of public interest. I do not agree with you. I think, if a vote was taken that a very small proportion of your readers, the ones who are always writing to the Vizigraph, would be in favor of it, instead of another tale.

I hereby propose (not that it will be taken up) that you print a questionnaire regarding the Vizigraph to see whether I am right. My only doubt regarding the outcome of it is that I am doubtful whether the readers who do not write to the Vizigraph will answer. . . .

Yours faithfully

ARTHUR D. HALL

(See page 59, this issue, Arthur. We put it there to be sure to catch the anti-Vizigraph readers—Ed.)